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A FIANCÉ ON TRIAL

BY

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A FIANCÉ ON TRIAL.

CHAPTER I.

"MISS HESLOW, may I present Mr. Styrges?"

The speaker was a man of medium height, but with a heavy, thick-set figure, which gave him the appearance of being much shorter than he really was. He had very thick and lustreless black hair thinly distributed over a small round, almost bullet-shaped head, and leaving, indeed, a small oval bald spot just over the middle of the forehead. People used to explain — *sotto voce*, of course—that the hirsute growth had been worn away from this spot by the constant friction of his own hand; for he had an irrepressible habit of gently stroking his

forehead before replying to any question, however trivial, that might be asked him. Not that he was slow of speech, for the words came thick and fast when he was once started. Indeed, it was more probable that the touch of his hand had rather a restraining than a stimulating effect upon his thoughts.

Beneath this forehead were two beady black eyes, which saw everything and saw in everything something to criticise and, if possible, to ridicule. People did not always understand those eyes as they really were: seeing in them a continual look of amusement they mistook it for good-nature; but an expression of his thoughts invariably corrected their first impression. The nose was long and narrow and very pointed—neither Grecian, Roman, nor like anything else under the sun, except that the contour reminded one of half an isosceles triangle the hypotenuse of which had been traced by a very unsteady hand. A bristly mustache partially covered a large, thin-lipped mouth over which a smile of conscious superiority was liable to spread at any mo-

ment. When the smile was worried and teased sufficiently it condescended to break into a loud, chuckling laugh. This laugh was the truest indication of the nature within, for it was self-assertive but mirthless, and the accompanying chuckle formed an undertone which showed that the owner had some *arrière pensée* which was the true cause of his mirth.

From this description one would immediately set down Craik Orcutt as a very disagreeable and undesirable character. But there is more to be said, and that in his favor. To quote from somebody, accurately or inaccurately, he was an olla-podrida of money, brains, and brass. The money and the brains were most certainly in his favor; and as for the brass—well, he may be excused for his care in cultivating that quality a certain proportion of which does no man very much harm, and may do him much good.

His father had held large manufacturing interests in a prosperous Connecticut town, as had his father before him, and had by virtue of his money contracted an excellent marriage with one of the old New York families.

After his marriage he had sold out his interests and had realized a large fortune, which, skilfully invested in real-estate, had nearly doubled itself by the time that Craik came of age. But Orcutt *père*, already well on in life, had died when Craik was but ten years old and had left the bulk of his fortune in trust for his son, to be handed over to him when he came of age. Craik's mother had died when he was twenty, leaving her share also to him; so that when he became his own master he found himself the master also of the enormous income, for a single man, of eighty thousand a year. As he was naturally of a close disposition as regarded money-matters and had never spent a third of his income, even in his most extravagant days, he found himself now, at the age of thirty-nine, at liberty to dispose of at least a hundred thousand a year.

To his credit be it said that with all his vast opportunities for self-indulgence he was not vicious: he had no habits which might be called bad, he did not gamble nor did he drink to excess. And yet, when we consider that vice is in nine cases out of ten

inherent, and that Craik Orcutt's nature did not direct him to indulge in excesses of any kind, we feel constrained to accord praise only with reservations. He had never been to college, and he had thus been spared that rough, unavoidable contact with natures and dispositions of all kinds which as often does a young fellow harm as it does good. He was fond of study for its own sake and, perhaps, a little because of genuine ambition to cultivate his natural ability and to fit himself for contact with men and women of the world. He was really clever, and had he possessed less conceit and more ambition of a better kind he might have done great things. But he was content to live for his own pleasure, as he defined pleasure.

But although he may have gained something by not going through college, he had undeniably lost a great deal as well. One of the chief advantages of a college life is that it knocks the nonsense and conceit out of a man and teaches him how to value his fellows at their true worth. This appreciation of the rights and privileges of others was sadly lacking in Craik Orcutt's composi-

tion, and he knew it. But the habit of self-esteem was of too long standing and was too deeply imbedded in the man's whole nature to be changed by any one of the thousand events and happenings that go to make up a man's life during twenty-four hours. The result was that Orcutt never had been and never could be popular among men. He had some friends, a goodly number of satellites, and a still larger number of acquaintances who were decent to him because they were gentlemen and had no particular reason for treating him otherwise. But the majority stood slightly aloof, and many even feared him because of his knack of making disagreeable remarks. With women he was not a favorite, but he was sought for by many of them because of the glamour that his millions lent him.

He was now an established figure in society, though it had not always been so. Entitled to recognition by virtue of his mother's birth and position, and also by what is better than tradition, his father's honesty and uprightness, he had from boyhood always looked forward to the day when

he could take the place which was, he fancied, being reserved for him among the best people. When the period of mourning after his mother's death had expired, he was invited to a large dinner at a cousin's house. He was much surprised at discovering that people did not know who he was, even when they were told; and he was still more surprised that when they did know him better they were not extremely cordial and did not appear especially desirous of being favored with his society. Invitations came very few and far between, and then only when the attention seemed to be called for by his cousin's frequent mention of him. Orcutt accepted all of these invitations: he made it an especial point to go to every house where he was tolerated, and he tried in his own peculiar way to be agreeable to all whom he met.

One night at a dance, unseen, he overheard young Thompson remark to Jessie Anderson that he "could not endure that conceited fool Orcutt;" and as they moved away he heard her state her opinion that "Mr. Orcutt was decidedly fresh." This set him

thinking, with the result that he really tried to express his opinions less freely and to be more friendly with the men—though he really did not understand what there was wrong about him. It was a long struggle, but he won. At first he was asked more frequently from politeness; then he was asked because he came to be regarded as "one of the people one usually meets." So that now he was a fixture—though, if the truth were known, he was no better liked than formerly.

"Miss Heslow," he repeated, as the girl to whom he spoke did not immediately notice him, "I beg your pardon, but may I present Mr. Styrges? Now you two can talk 'dance' to your hearts' content—for you both dance well," he added, with an attempt at good-humor. "I shall come to claim my dance later, Miss Heslow, so good-bye for the present."

Margaret Heslow had turned from the men to whom she was talking when Orcutt claimed her attention, and smiled and offered her hand to Styrges; and now, at Orcutt's last words, she nodded pleasantly. She was a girl of perhaps twenty-two—possibly, but

not probably, twenty-three; about five feet four in height, well developed and slightly inclined to be athletic in figure. Her soft, wavy hair was of a reddish-brown shade, somewhat like the color of old mahogany, and was worn piled rather loosely on the top of her head. Her eyes were a deep brown, with just a glint of gold in them which appeared in certain lights. They were great, honest eyes whose expression never belied her words; sometimes a glance from them seemed to suggest that there was more in their depths than could be said in words. Her face was oval, her nose regular, but her mouth a trifle large. There was no affectation in her smile as she turned to greet Styrges, only an expression of a certain degree of pleasure which she really felt at meeting him; and he noted with satisfaction that the hand which she placed in his was not weak and helpless, but had a language of its own. Just at this moment it seemed to emphasize her words.

"I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Styrges. It is very strange that we have never met before, is it not? Here I am at the end of

my second season in society (you see, I have no false pride at calling your attention to the fact!), and I have seen you at ever so many places, known the same people that you know, and for all that, chance has never uttered for us that essential phrase, 'May I introduce you?'"

Malcolm Styrges understood the instant she began to speak wherein lay her great charm of which he had heard so many tell—it was her voice. It was a deep voice, for a woman, but yet not at all masculine; it came out clearly and distinctly from the throat, yet softly and pleasantly. It had an indescribable quality of tone and richness which charmed the ear just as some subtle flavoring pleases the palate—just as though she loved the words she spoke and delayed uttering them until she had formed each to perfection. Her voice said as clearly as her actions that she thoroughly understood herself, that she was self-reliant; and its quiet, almost grave tone led Styrges to believe that her school had been experience, and that experience had taught her the art of sympathy. Styrges could find no other word to define

the quality that she impressed him as possessing: it did not mean to him solely her power of understanding the feelings of others, but also the perfect unison of all her faculties in understanding and interpreting her own feelings through her voice, gesture, and expression. All these impressions came to him instantly and together, so that he had scarcely time to comprehend them before she ceased speaking. But he found afterward that they had acted upon his mind as a ray of light upon a dry-plate, and had left to him a clear, vivid, and above all, a true picture of her nature.

"It is a great deal my own fault, Miss Heslow," he replied, catching a part of her meaning; for he had been listening to her voice, not to her words. "A man can usually meet a woman if he asks for an introduction. Don't think me rude, please." I feel convinced that if I said nothing you would conclude that I had not wanted to meet you, and I want to remove that impression, if I may. I do not often care to make new acquaintances or friends, as the case may be, and I rarely ask to be presented to any one.

Not that I am blasé; but I confess that I do not take much interest in women. So you see that I am uncomplimentary to the sex, not to its individual members."

"Is it indiscreet to ask if you requested to meet me, Mr. Styrges?"

"I think the truth is quite as complimentary as flattery would be, because to you one must tell the truth. No, I did not. Mr. Orcutt spoke to me a few minutes ago and said that he would like to introduce me, and of course I said I should be delighted. I begin to think that fate has been kind in reserving for me an unexpected pleasure."

She looked very pleased at his words, though he did not understand why she should. "You naturally feel that you owe me some reparation," she said, laughing carelessly. "I shall be more generous and tell you candidly that I shall presently thank Mr. Orcutt for this pleasure."

"I believe I hinted that I should do the same," remarked Styrges. "Have you this dance free for me, Miss Heslow?" as the music began.

She had been wishing that he would ask

her to dance, for she knew that he danced well, both from watching him and because Craik Orcutt had said so—and when that gentleman gave any one praise one might feel sure that it was well merited.

"Really, I ought to say that I have, but I am tempted to tell you that you may have it. I promised it to Mr. Morris—you know him?—a little fellow, a mere boy. But he dances very well indeed. I suppose I should keep my promise—ah! it's too late now, here he is. You may have the next, Mr. Styrges," she called back as she was led away.

Styrges walked slowly after her as far as the entrance of the ball-room, where he stopped and leaning against the door-post watched the dancers.

He was tall and well built, carrying his broad shoulders well back. One would at first sight have taken him for a Spaniard, for his glossy hair and heavy mustache were jet-black, his eyes were almost black, and his skin was dark. Indeed, the family could boast of a strain of the blood of Spanish nobility away back among the great-greats:

since that time the dark complexion and black hair had been a distinctive mark in the family of Styrges, who were, however, to all intents and in all principles American to the backbone. That which he did undeniably inherit from his Spanish ancestor was a quick temper. Outwardly he could be calm enough; but those who knew him were careful not to arouse in his black eyes a certain dangerous glitter. Though he had himself pretty well under control, he was the more dangerous when once aroused.

He had sown his wild oats long since, carefully and judiciously, and in many different ways, seldom repeating an experience because from the very first he had looked upon this operation not as a pleasure, but as a matter of education not to be neglected. Some experiences had disgusted him, most of them had wearied him; so he had settled down into the comparatively humdrum life of society as much to please his mother as to please himself, and because he found nothing else to occupy his time so completely. His father had died when Malcolm was very young, and his mother had since tried her

best to spoil him. He was, however, not naturally lazy; and so, feeling the imperative necessity of having something else to do than dance, he had studied law and still practiced to the extent of managing a few small estates. It was not as much as he would have liked to do, but it served to occupy his mind for a short time each day.

So that now, at the age of thirty-two, he was, if not blasé enough to be bored by society, at least enough so to be completely indifferent to its petty schemes for making time fly. His mother lived in society and its gossip was meat and drink to her, and she could not understand why her son should take so little interest in that which seemed to her the natural occupation of every human being (of certain well-defined and desirable qualities). So to preserve the peace Malcolm tried to please her by showing himself at every affair of any importance.

To-night, as he stood there, he really felt some pleasure in looking forward to a dance with Miss Heslow. Surely, he thought, a girl with a voice like hers must have something to say that would be worth listening

to. She did not smirk and smile too much; she did not act as if she expected a compliment alternated with a stupidly funny jest; and there were a great many things that she did do, as well as those she did not do, which were recommendations — dancing, for instance. And, by Jove! she did dance well! Decidedly, he thought, he must dance with her though she spoke the argot of Cherry Street.

"Good-evening, Malcolm," said a fair-haired, blue-eyed girl who was passing, stopping by him and offering her hand. "Are not you dancing to-night? You have not asked me for a single turn as yet, and you've been wandering about all the evening. What's the trouble?"

"Hallo, Sylvia! You here after all? I have been looking in all the most secluded corners to find you the whole evening."

"Trust you to know the most unlikely places! That is the reason you didn't find me, for I have been out here dancing all the evening—haven't I, Mr. Benson?"

"What? A whole evening and not one quiet tête-à-tête! Truly, that is too bad,"

said Styrges with a trace of sarcasm. "How very unlike you."

"You are very disagreeable now. But it's all because of the men I have been with," she said in an undertone, leaning nearer to him. "You ask me for a dance later and see if I don't change. Good-bye—don't forget."

As she departed he looked after her rather indifferently with perhaps a shadow of annoyance on his face. Then, as the music signalled the next dance, he sought out Miss Heslow and walked over to her.

They had not taken ten steps before he knew that he was with a girl who loved dancing and understood it. She moved as though by mere volition, not by any physical effort: she did not drag nor push, she seemed to understand where he was about to lead her even before his hand had signified it by a pressure. It was as though she could read his mind and were moving as a part of himself. After one or two remarks they by mutual but unspoken consent, remained silent, enjoying to the utmost this one first waltz. He was enchanted: it seemed almost impossible that two living human beings who

had never met until that evening could move so perfectly in unison, without the slightest trip or hesitation. And yet it was she who was so perfectly suiting her movements to his, for he was not conscious of dancing any better than usual.

The music stopped suddenly and he released her slowly and half in a dream. It seemed to him that they were still gliding over the floor.

"Thank you, that was very nice," she said calmly. She looked not the slightest bit tired or warm, and she seemed quite unconscious of having done anything extraordinary. The truth was that she had danced as she always did, trying to suit her step to that of her partner; and although Styrges danced well and it had been even less exertion than usual to dance with him, she had found ever so many other men who danced well, too. "Will you take me out for an ice, Mr. Styrges? It is quite warm in here."

"You dance wonderfully well, Miss Heslow," he said as they moved away. "Is it natural to you?—or have you studied to perfect it?"

"I am glad you like it. Of course I had to study my step a great deal, but it is very far from being wonderful. You do not seem to care very much for dances, Mr. Styrges. I have never seen you dance more than twice during an evening."

"There are several reasons why I do not care much about it. One is that so few girls dance really well nowadays. Then they are, as a rule, so very young that one feels that they ought still to be at school learning how to talk more sensibly and entertainingly; and as for the men—they ought still to be in knickerbockers! It would seem that in a few years girls will have their coming-out teas at the age of ten or twelve. It spoils any girl to receive attention before her mind has been developed."

"I wonder that you should take the trouble to go anywhere, if those are your opinions," she remarked dryly.

"No, mind you, Miss Heslow, I am not capable of criticising justly, for the reason that I have never experienced an evening spent in the Utopia of which I was dreaming—probably I should find it equally as

dull as this. But here I feel that I am not appreciated—not that I consider myself a superior article!—because there are so many younger men who can chaff and pay compliments *ad nauseam*, just as they are expected to do. I joined this series of dances partly from habit, partly because the patroness, Mrs. Brant, is one of my best friends; and I have been to but two of the meetings besides this. Here it is the last, and I am glad of it— no, I am not glad! because the truth is, I should like to have another dance with you now that we have met. Occasionally one does meet a girl who is not a continual interrogation nor an exclamation point."

"The bitterness of shattered hopes," she exclaimed with mock pathos. "You are a remarkably bad case of spoilt child, Mr. Styrges. Some kind friend should take you in hand and show you how to be content with the existing state of things—that is, if Silvia Pelton has not already undertaken the task."

"Miss Pelton may do so, or may be doing so now, for all that I know or care," he said

rather tartly. "I fail to see what she has to do with me."

"How odd! Mr. Orcutt told me that you two were engaged. I beg your pardon for my indiscretion."

"You are pardoned," he remarked gravely. "I hope you will tell Mr. Orcutt that he and everybody else who shares his impression are mistaken. I am not engaged to Miss Pelton, never have been, and probably never shall be. Here is Mr. Orcutt now."

"You are not angry with me?" she asked. "You see, it was not my fault. I shall do as you ask and I'll try to make reparation."

"Then will you give me a dance before you go?"

"The fourth from this," she said pleasantly. "Yes, Mr. Orcutt, this is yours, I believe."

Styrges, left to himself, would ordinarily have gone home about this time. It was growing late and a few people were straggling away, chiefly the girls who, having received very little attention during the evening, were growing weary of trying to look as though they were enjoying themselves. But

Styrges felt a strange disinclination to leave while there was a hope of seeing Miss Heslow again. It was seldom that he put himself to the slightest inconvenience to see any girl a second time, and it puzzled him to account for his readiness to do so now. He concluded that there were two reasons, slight in themselves, yet appealing to his mind with singular force: he wished to hear her voice again; and he wanted to study her and to understand, if he could, whence came her lack of that foolishness and inanity which in other girls so repelled him. Of course he wanted to dance with her again; but that he could do as well at some other time. No, the true reason was that she had stimulated his interest; and that was too novel a sensation for him to forego the pleasure of satisfying his curiosity concerning her.

Thinking of dancing reminded him of Sylvia Pelton, and he remembered that he had promised to dance with her. He always kept his promises, so now he went to find her. She was surrounded by four young fellows who were vying with one

another in their attempts to make her laugh. Most of the very young men one meets seem to consider that a laugh is worth its weight in gold—a panacea for all evils, a sure way to please, the most convenient substitute for words that will not flow so easily as one could desire, a passport which entitles them to a first-class place in every woman's good books. The power to laugh is a blessing from God, a tonic that restores a diseased mind. But laughter may become as great a curse as the morphine habit; and the too easy indulgence in it may cause a man to be regarded as a fool by those who know how to use without abusing this by no means least of God's gifts to us poor, weary mortals. What wonder that a year in such society as this makes a woman doubt her own intelligence!

"You have come for your dance at last?" Sylvia exclaimed as Styrges approached. "I have grave doubts of your deserving it. Mr. Jarvis and Mr. Talcot, I must ask you to release me from my promises to dance with you, as I have promised Mr. Styrges two successive dances whenever he might

choose to claim them. You may each have one later."

She did not look at Styrges while she was speaking, but took his arm and moved away. He was not surprised, for he knew her way of appropriating him; but he was assuredly not pleased to have her take possession of him in this off-hand manner. He had not asked her for two dances, nor was he sure that he had even asked her for one.

"You are a living example of cheek, Sylvia," he said coldly, as she led him out to the hall and seated herself on the stairs.

"Thank you," she said, perfectly unmoved. "And you are a monument of privileged impertinence. Now, I did not tell a lie, and I did not swallow your abuse in order that you might quarrel with me. You may be in a bad temper if you like, and you may say disagreeable things; but you must nevertheless talk to me. I feel very charitable and patient after my Lenten self-denials, so I can overlook small outbreaks. Now answer me a question: have you arranged for that house-party?"

"Oh, yes," he said indifferently, "I have

found a few people who will go—yourself, your brother, and Mrs. Pelton, Orcutt, and Gerald Anthony. We shall need a couple more."

"Whom shall you ask?"

"That is not decided. I have thought of several people, but it is very doubtful yet. We must wait until the roads are better—it will be much pleasanter in the spring."

Gradually his feeling of annoyance subsided, and they chatted quite amicably for several minutes. He had almost lost track of the dances, when suddenly as a waltz began he observed Miss Heslow standing at the foot of the stairs as though waiting for some one. She had not seen him, but kept looking at the different people who passed.

"Great Scott! I believe I am engaged for this," he said quickly. "Sylvia, you must excuse me, will you?"

She was annoyed, but she knew better than to show it. She had counted on having a really long talk with him, for she knew that no one would have the temerity to interrupt them. People—especially the men—had learned long since not to interfere

with her when she was with Styrges, and it was commonly reported that she was engaged to him. And now he, who seldom, if ever, danced with any one but herself, had upset all her well-laid plans by an open act of revolt.

"You may take me to Mr. Jarvis or leave me near him," she said. "I am sure he will ask me for this. I suppose there is no use suggesting that you come back later to finish our talk?"

"I will try. Thank you for the dance, Sylvia."

He found Miss Heslow still waiting for him in the same place and apologized to her for being late.

"I had given up hopes of you," she said, as they moved away. "It is very hard to keep one's dances straight without an order."

Once again he enjoyed to the utmost the pleasure of dancing with her, and he felt again the strange sensation that she could read his mind and knew beforehand exactly where he was going. He purposely steered through the thickest of the crowd, but she followed without a false step or a suspi-

cion of hesitation. The music stopped all too soon.

"I am going now, Mr. Styrges. Can you come with me and meet my aunt, Mrs. Rand? I want you to know her."

She led the way across the room to a rather stout, pleasant-looking woman and introduced him. Mrs. Rand was a widow of very uncertain age—surely not less than forty, nor yet more than fifty—well-preserved, but with no distinctive outward characteristics except her kindly gray eyes and the sweetest manners imaginable, with a touch of the old-time Southern cordiality that appealed to Styrges immediately.

"If you are going now may I find your carriage?" he asked; and was pleased when Mrs. Rand accepted. So he rushed out into the cool night-breeze, risking his health, and yet not giving it a thought—which he would not have done had it been for Sylvia Pelton.

"You must come and see us, Mr. Styrges," said Mrs. Rand, as he wished them good-night at the carriage door. "If you will not come to see Margaret, come to see me—number three hundred, Madison Avenue.

We shall both be glad to see you—shall we not, Margaret?"

Styrges did not catch Miss Heslow's reply; but from the smile and the pleasant nod that she gave him he surmised that she would receive him kindly,

He re-entered Sherry's, walked straight to the cloak-room and called for his things. He did not want to see Sylvia again that night, for he had clearly before him a picture that he would not mar, the sound of a voice that he would not confuse with any other—that of a girl who had awakened at least his curiosity, if not something more.

CHAPTER II.

MARGARET HESLOW'S remark to the effect that he was commonly reported engaged to Sylvia Pelton recurred to Styrges the next morning as he was riding to business downtown in the Elevated, and it annoyed him a great deal. He could not fix his mind upon any of the articles in his newspaper, for the thought that perhaps he had given the world reason to believe, as it did, in their engagement continually perplexed him. He had known Sylvia since she was a small child, and he used to think that he admired her. She had as a girl been very precocious in her opinions and actions, and up to a certain point her very precocity had interested and amused him. She had grown to be a very handsome girl, with a wealth of soft golden hair, large blue eyes, a perfect complexion, and a beautifully sensitive mouth—which could, however, assume a very firm expres-

sion on occasions. She had a certain dash in manner and conversation over which young men went wild and older men grew thoughtful ; and thanks to both personality and manner, she never lacked for attention.

Her parents had lived in San Francisco for the last three years, while Sylvia much preferred to live in New York with her brother Jack and his wife. She had never regularly "come out," but she was taken everywhere by her brother or by Winifred Pelton ; and now having been in society for three seasons she was well-known and generally liked. Some few matrons were disposed to frown upon her flirtations, which were periodical and were conducted with great enthusiasm. But the majority of people considered her only bright, pretty, and altogether charming.

There are some girls who assume that all men are only too glad to be dictated to and ordered about by them, receiving as reward a smile or a "thank you" spoken in a low, timid voice. Some women allow their obligations to members of the other sex to accumulate until the poor man begins to dis-

believe in feminine gratitude ; then suddenly and unexpectedly—and all the more acceptably for that reason—they seek to crush him under the weight of a half-hour of soft glances and whispered words conveying more —or less—hope for the future. And who may deny that they are successful ? Far too rare are the men who can remain proof against skilful management. It is as though she were striving to conceal her regard by pretended indifference, when in reality the current of her emotions is too strong for her and must break through—at least, so he believes. And just so long as he does not find another who will treat him more kindly, just so long will he remain her slave.

Sylvia had always desired to hold Styrges under her thumb. She had found two influences to work in her favor: they were friends of long standing and she had begun very early to express her wishes and to see that he carried them out, and thus she had, unknown to him, trained him to obedience; and she was also a great favorite with Mrs. Styrges. She had never been at any pains to conceal from that lady her preference for

Malcolm; and having already his mother's personal affection, she had gradually enlisted her sympathy. She was frequently invited to the house by Mrs. Styrges, and as she always saw Malcolm on such occasions there were plenty of opportunities favorable to the accomplishment of her wishes. Malcolm had always treated her kindly, sometimes even affectionately; but he had never made love to her, had never asked her to be his wife. She was not in any hurry that he should, for she enjoyed her liberty too well; but she had never dreamed but that he would ask her eventually. Meanwhile she was too clever to bore him or to arouse his opposition by laying claim to him too openly. She trusted in his sense of honor, and felt confident that when he was ready he would ask her to marry him, both because he really liked her and because he would recognize the fact that he had been paying her attention and was thus committed.

And Sylvia took care that he should be attentive to her. She appealed to him if she wanted a favor, flattered him by her deference to his opinions—she had once given up

dancing for two months because he told her that dancing was injuring her health—and sometimes for variety issued her commands and expected him to obey. He usually did obey; but she was careful not to drive him so far that he would not go farther. Lately she had noticed that he took less interest in her wishes than formerly, and was not so content to be with her as he had been a few months before. She could not account for the change in him and it sometimes caused her considerable annoyance; but she knew that at the least outbreak of temper on her part she would lose him, so she tried to be very patient. She felt that she had gone just a mite too far the preceding evening, that she had tried to show her authority too openly, and as a result he had revolted and had spoken rudely to her for the first time in all the years of their acquaintance. It had hurt her, not in her affection for him, but in her pride, and she had cried over it afterwards.

Styrges, as he rode downtown did not know this, of course. He did, however, recollect his rude speech, and he was ashamed

of himself both for his lapse of good manners and for the very unkindness of the remark. Sylvia he had for long regarded as his best girl-friend, and he regretted wounding her feelings as he would regret hurting the feelings of any of his friends—and no more. And still, had he really hurt her? Did not she look upon it as a bit of banter? He could not tell from the manner in which she had received it. He did not believe that she cared for him, first, because she had never acted as though she did; secondly, because he did not believe her capable of loving any man very seriously. He had known her long enough and well enough to be quite certain of the truth of his opinions on the former grounds; and he had too often watched the progress of her various flirtations with other men and had too often heard her joke about her conquests to believe in the depth of her fancies. He had often told her quite seriously that she was heartless, and she had unhesitatingly admitted that he was right. Still, he could not but see that she liked him, for she always seemed genuinely pleased to be with him, she invariably sought his opin-

ion before taking steps in any matter of importance, and usually followed his advice.

However indifferent he might be, he could not but feel a trifle flattered by her interest in him. He admired her personally as a pretty girl, as a clever woman, and he was glad to have her as a friend; but that was all. Of course, he had thought of marrying her if she would have him, but he had found in his heart no love for her, only esteem and sincere regard. Once, when his mother had hinted at such a possibility, he had replied that such a thing might happen some day, but that he had every intention of choosing his own time should he ever seriously contemplate such a step; and she had never pressed him further.

But now had taken place that upon which Sylvia Pelton had calculated—he was forced to consider their mutual relations by hearing the report that he was already engaged to her. At first he was very angry at the idea that he, a man and a free-will agent, was to be disposed of off-hand, without a word to say in the matter save to give his assent. Then, calming down, he tried to

look at the affair from the point of view of others: he felt obliged to admit that there was some foundation for the report. He had, so far as appearances went, been paying her devoted attention for the last three years; he was with her at the opera, at dances, in the street; and besides this, she had passed a great part of every summer as the guest of his mother at their country-place near Rhinecliffe. Then she had seemed to assume in public a manner towards him which hinted at proprietorship, and he now marvelled at her cleverness. But might not she, too, be the victim of appearances? He could not readily believe that she had calculated and schemed to bring about the present state of affairs, nor would he believe it until he had positive proof of some sort.

Just now he began to feel more kindly disposed toward her. If she were not, as he believed, knowingly responsible for the opinion held by society, was not she entitled to some reparation from him? Should not he give her the opportunity of refusing him? He had placed her in a false position by giving people reason to suppose that there

was far more between them than was actually the case, and he had thus unwittingly done her harm by keeping away other men who felt some hesitation about paying attention to a girl who was already spoken for. Decidedly, he could see but one manly course of action, and that was—to ask her to marry him. It was not easy, it would not be pleasant; but, though he did not love her, he was fond of her and hoped that in time he might grow to love her.

He had by this time reached his office in the Equitable Building. The one clerk whom he kept to do the writing, run on errands, and be polite to chance visitors during his absence, was engaged in no more pressing business than reading the morning's paper—though he instantly dropped the paper on Styrges' entrance and began to fumble with the pages of a massive law-book. Styrges, of course, was not taken in by this sudden show of diligence, for the same thing occurred every morning.

"Not very much business, is there, Townsend?" he said, smiling. "Are there any letters for me?"

"Yes, sir; right over there on your desk," replied Townsend with becoming gravity. "I was just looking up a little point in that case about Welles' mortgage, sir."

"I know. Townsend, will you take these papers over to McBride—and wait for an answer;" as the fellow departed. "A couple of bills, those records of Andrew's conveyance, and a letter from Gerald Anthony"—musing. "He will be down here this morning, he says. Now I always imagined that he was the one who is really in love with Sylvia; not that he ever said so; but he acts as though he would be willing to die for her. Well, I wish he might have her; for I can't say that I want her so very badly myself—but I have to do it." And he settled down to pore over some papers.

Styrges' determination was undeniably Quixotic. He had a very strong sense of honor, and was thoroughly convinced that honor demanded some decisive step on his part. The fact that he had placed himself in so awkward a position without being aware of what he was doing did not in his opinion excuse him in the least—the result was ex-

actly the same. If he had cared very deeply for some other girl he would hardly have hesitated to have a full explanation with Sylvia, telling her frankly that he did not love her and asking her to forgive him for leading her to suppose that he did, and thus placing her and himself in a false relationship to each other. But there was no other girl for whom he felt any personal regard, save as a friend or acquaintance; there were no ties to keep him from Sylvia if he chose to ask her to be his wife, It did not occur to him that, even as it was, he was perfectly free to have an explanation with her without going further: perhaps he did not care sufficiently what he did with his future, provided that it satisfied his present strict sense of what was right. As to the future itself, he did not doubt that Sylvia Pelton would make him as good a wife as any of the other girls he had met; if they had done so well as friends, it was extremely likely that they could agree as man and wife—and surely, their love would be the truer for being based on friendship. With rare conceit he hardly acknowledged the possibility of his being

refused; he faced the (for him) worst aspect of the case, without taking into account minor developments.

He had been busily at work for an hour when Gerald Anthony walked in. "How are you, Malcolm?" as Styrges looked up. "You got my note? I came to ask your advice about selling that wretched little bit of land up in Tarrytown."

"Sit down and be comfortable. Now I should advise you to hold on to it for a while longer. You see—" and Styrges fell to weighing the pros and cons as they appeared from his point of view.

Gerald Anthony was four years Styrges' junior, of medium height and slightly built, fair-haired, and with a clear, rosy complexion. He looked much younger than he really was, and in his clear blue eyes was an expression of invariable good-nature and, as some said, of utter innocence. His manners were gentle, graceful, and almost girlish, as also his voice, and his hands were white and soft. He always dressed in the best possible taste, and his clothes were always fresh and new-looking. His disposition was mild: he

hardly ever took offence at a joke or a bit of sarcasm, being careful, in fact, to avoid quarrels of any kind. Judged by his exterior, he was a dainty, girlish, useless little creature, good for nothing but to look pretty.

Such had been the opinion of his mates at boarding-school, and they teased and worried him almost to death. But one day, just before school closed, something occurred which had the effect of teaching them a lesson.

They had been bathing in the small stream which flowed near the school until they were tired out. It was a narrow stream, but very deep and rapid, and at the foot of the pool which they had selected as a bath-tub the water rushed swiftly over a ledge and fell some fifteen feet into a rocky basin.

On this particular afternoon Knowles, the bully of the school, challenged them to swim across to the opposite bank, eighty feet distant, and back again. It was not much of a swim; but they were all fatigued and declined the challenge. Knowles then started to do it himself. He had reached the other bank and had started to come back, when suddenly, in mid-stream, he threw up

his hands, cried for help, and sank. All knew instantly that he had been seized with a cramp, and there was much excitement. Some rushed down the stream to catch him as he floated over the falls—vain hope—others ran madly about looking for a rope.

Meanwhile Anthony had pushed his way through their midst, plunged into the water, and struck out for the centre. The current bore him down; but when he was near the falls, dangerously so, he dove and succeeded in grasping his quondam persecutor by the back of the neck, and they rose together to the surface. It was too late to reach the bank, for they were within a few feet of the falls. As mere luck would have it, Anthony was able at the very last moment to grasp with his left hand the end of a branch which one of his companions was bending down over the water. It was then that the muscle under his soft round arm proved that it could be relied upon. The strain was intense; but he held on until his schoolmates had drawn them both out. After that he was never jeered at, and he made at least one friend who is to this day willing to die for him.

When he first was known in New York he was regarded in much the same light as he had been at school—as a dainty ornament. But here, too, he had shown of what stuff he was made by risking his life to stop a runaway. He afterwards discovered that the lady on the horse was Sylvia Pelton.

Styrges had known him for a long time and appreciated his many and manly qualities, besides finding in him a true friend. Anthony, on his part, admired Styrges for himself and was attached to him because he felt that the latter liked him. He had nothing to do save to dress well, to dance, and to make himself agreeable to people in general; so that he had a great abundance of time to devote to his individual friends. He passed a large proportion of his time with Styrges, either at the latter's office or at their club. Styrges had charge of Anthony's money-affairs and was often able to give him good advice. As to advice in matters outside of business, Anthony stood in need of none, being altogether a sober, extremely sensible and well-conducted fellow. His worst habit (incidentally) was that he consumed daily

an unheard-of number of cigarettes. To an almost unusual extent he kept his own counsel in most matters, scarcely ever talking about himself or his affairs, and seldom busying himself with the affairs of others. Towards Styrges this reticence did not arise from any feeling of distrust, but rather from habit; for he had never when young had an intimate friend, and did not know what it was to make one's thoughts and feelings the subjects of conversation.

"Very well," Anthony remarked; "I shall take your advice and wait for a time. Now tell me something, Malcolm, if you do not mind—is it true that you are engaged to Sylvia Pelton? I heard it stated as a fact this morning."

"Who told you so?" asked Styrges quickly.

"Craik Orcutt said he had heard that it was just announced."

"Ah! I thought so. That man is put here on this earth for no use but to tell what he thinks will cause a little commotion, a little trouble, and will make people fear his double-hinged tongue. Really, if he

were not such a sneak, I should be pretty angry with him in a very practical way."

"Then you are not engaged?"—somewhat eagerly.

Styrges looked at him a minute before replying. "I think I understand you," he said with a change from his former tone. "No, I am decidedly not engaged to Miss Pelton nor to any one else—and you might casually breathe it into Orcutt's ear if you should stumble over him anywhere. If that fellow continues to take a wrong view of certain things, I shall really take the trouble to tell him the truth myself. As I said, I am not engaged to Miss Pelton."

Anthony lost for a moment his habitual reserve, for he leaned forward and grasped Styrges' hand. It might have appeared that Styrges was receiving a congratulation upon not being engaged. But though neither spoke, Styrges understood it differently, and now felt convinced of the truth of that which he had often guessed concerning his friend.

"Whom did you see at the dance last night, Malcolm?" asked Anthony in his usual tone. "I could not get there—had

some fellows to dinner, fellows from the country."

"Yes, I missed you. There were practically the same lot of people as ever—Nellie Van Dorn, the Wares, and lots of others. I was introduced to a new girl, Miss Heslow, who has a delicious voice and dances beautifully. Do you know her?"

"Very slightly; but I know who she is. Her father was very prominent in business circles and was treasurer of the International Society, besides holding positions of more or less importance in various corporations and syndicates. He left quite a snug fortune well invested."

"Isn't her mother living? She seems to be stopping with her aunt, Mrs. Rand."

"No, she is an orphan. You know her father died when she was but six months old and her mother followed him six months later. I really believe that old widow, Mrs. Rand, has been a perfect mother to the girl, and Margaret is devoted to her. As she was so very young when her parents died, I don't think that her nature has been affected by that great sorrow, as is the case with

some. Still, she always impressed me as being a girl who has been toned and deepened by some great trouble."

"The same impression that she made upon me!" exclaimed Styrges. "She appears to understand herself thoroughly. I think I shall call upon her, since she was so kind as to ask me. Will you lunch with me, Gerald?"

"No, thank you, Malc; I have an engagement uptown early this afternoon and I must go home first. I think it is about time that I left now——" looking at his watch.

"Try to drop in at the club this afternoon about six-thirty and tell me all the good news," said Styrges with a meaning smile which the other understood. "Good-bye, old fellow, and luck go with you."

Anthony took his friend's hand and smiled in his turn, but at the same time he shook his head. "All right, I'll see you and tell you all the bad news. Thanks for your good wishes all the same."

Gerald Anthony was usually a little slow in forming his opinions and perhaps a little backward in acting; but once resolved, he

was very tenacious of his purpose and could, as some people knew, act promptly and decisively. He had met Sylvia Pelton about three years previous, at the time when her mother and father left for the West, and he had been but very slightly impressed by her at first. He saw her very frequently, being a friend of her brother Jack. One morning he awoke to the realization of the fact that he was far from indifferent to her, but was, in fact, very deeply in love with her. For a long time he hesitated to admit to himself that he was in earnest, for his knowledge of his own disposition warned him that when once fully decided in his own mind he could not change his feelings so easily. Then came the day on which he had seen a horse dashing towards him, threatening to hurl to the ground the woman with pale, white face and swaying form who clung frantically to the bridle. Anthony was not thinking of Sylvia when he rushed out into the path to meet the horse, threw himself at its head, and seized the bridle, and was dragged, pulled, and shaken about, until finally the animal stopped and the girl was safe—but a

few moments after, and ever since, he thought of Sylvia a great deal.

Sylvia Pelton made it her own particular affair to discover those men whom she believed to be in love with her, and such men she did not fail to encourage to declare themselves, so that she might enjoy the sense of having made a new slave and the satisfaction of holding them well in hand for the future. She never made the mistake of allowing a man to expect too much or to go too far in his adoration; but she had the knack of always leaving him in doubt as to her precise feelings towards him. What she possessed of heart she had long ago given to Malcolm, for she really liked him; but, being a flirt, she did not on that account hesitate to amuse herself with the other men who chanced her way. She had before long noticed that Anthony was more attentive to her since his rescue of her than ever before, and she believed that he was in the way of falling a victim. She had therefore tried all her art of encouragement upon him, but all to no purpose. She believed that he really loved her, but that he had sufficient self-con-

trol not to let her hear it from his own lips; she could not divine his reason for hesitating, but she admired and respected him for it more than she did any other man, Styrges excepted.

Styrges himself had until that morning been at a loss to account for Anthony's excessive reticence and hesitancy. He had suspected that Anthony was interested in Miss Pelton, and he had really hoped that she was inclined to become Sylvia Anthony. He now placed all his own hopes of freedom in Anthony and his success, since their hopes were, in fact, the same. Anthony's question that morning had, as it were, revealed to Styrges a great light—the light of truth and of hope. Knowing Gerald's keen sense of honor, he comprehended that the latter had kept himself in the background because he believed that Styrges was really in love with Sylvia, and he was unwilling to secure his own happiness at the cost of his friend's. He shrewdly suspected that Anthony would now feel himself at liberty to speak to Sylvia and to decide his fate.

Nor was he mistaken. Anthony had

argued just as Styrges had believed he would: so long as he believed that Malcolm's happiness depended upon Sylvia's acceptance of him, he would not raise a finger in his own behalf, for his loyalty to Styrges, being of longer standing, was even stronger than his love for Sylvia. Not that he dared to hope that she loved him better than she did Styrges; but he would not willingly place even a straw of opposition in the way of his friend's happiness. How much brighter the future looked now. He could ask and learn his fate with a clear conscience —and his friend had given him his blessing!

With Gerald Anthony to resolve was to act. He left his house in West Twentieth Street immediately after luncheon and walked uptown to the Peltons' in Fifty-third. He preferred to walk that he might give himself time to cool, for he was in a shivery, nervous state and felt wrought up to the highest pitch. Now that he had really started he hardly realized what he was about to do or of how much importance to him the result would be; he did not calculate his chances, he was only conscious that a great

event was about to take place and he was anxious to have it over with. These were his sensations while on his way uptown. The moment that he rang the bell, however, all nervousness left him and he became cool and clear-headed once more.

The maid informed him that Miss Pelton was at home, so he left his hat and coat in the hall and was shown into the parlor. There were a number of women in the back parlor and dining-room, to judge from the uproar of feminine voices and the light laughter that floated through the closed portières at the end of the room. He had just time to make up his mind that it would be useless to expect a quiet conversation with Sylvia that afternoon, when the portière was pushed aside and Mrs. Pelton entered.

She was not more than twenty-five, tall and graceful, with dark brown, wavy hair and brown eyes, and a smiling, tempting mouth. She was one of those women who are placed here on earth to help all who are near them—to suffer for others, because they know what it is to suffer; to help others, because they know what it is to need help

themselves ; to restore lost belief in the goodness of human nature, by proving that in them exist patience, helpfulness, sympathy, and sincerity. Such women are rarely happy on this earth, but they make all who know them happier and better. People often said that Winifred Pelton was too good for her husband, who, although he loved her devotedly, was somewhat inclined to be wild and reckless. If she herself had any such thought, no one knew it, and no one dared to inform her of the general opinion. She ranked loyalty high in the catalogue of virtues ; however much her husband might wound her by a thoughtless word or deed, not even in her thoughts would she cherish an unkind remembrance of it.

Anthony had known Winifred Fitch for a long, long time before she became Winifred Pelton, and as boy and girl they had passed through a children's love-affair, without, however, bearing away as remembrances of it any scarred hearts or shattered hopes. Such little experiences are among the rivets of friendship. If any one who knew Anthony knew that he loved Sylvia, that person was

Mrs. Pelton: she had known him so long and so well that she had a very clear perception of his feelings, try as he might to conceal them. Although she knew well that her sister-in-law had some very marked failings, still the fact that Anthony loved her was sufficient to make Winifred desire the match, and she was willing to help him in every way in her power.

"I suppose you came to see Sylvia," she said smiling, as they shook hands. "She has had a crowd of girls in for luncheon. Now tell me all the news, Gerald—what have you been doing lately?"

"Nothing very much—that is, the usual things, dances, teas, and so on. Tell me, Win, did you think that Sylvia was engaged to Styrges?"

"I didn't know she was," she said laughing. "No; and really, Gerald, I hope she never will be. I think those girls have left now,—you seem to have driven them away. I'll tell Sylvia that you are impatient to see her." She gave him her hand; and though she said nothing more, her eyes spoke encouragement and good wishes.

She had been gone but a minute when Sylvia entered and greeted Gerald somewhat indifferently. She seemed put out about something.

"How those girls tire me!" she exclaimed petulantly. "I know very well they will pick me to pieces the instant they turn the corner—that's because they are girls and have nothing better to talk about! Now men do have something better to do than to criticise one another; and besides, they have some sense of honor. Oh, Gerald! do wake me up and lift me out of this grumbling mood!"

"What do you want me to do, Sylvia? I think the best way to cure low spirits is to forget that you have them, and you presently find yourself in a jolly good humor. I have very little to talk about, for my part; but I'll ask you a question and let you talk, which is the next best thing. Are you engaged to Malcolm? I don't think you are, but I should like to hear it from your own lips."

Sylvia blushed, then grew confused. How she wished that she might say, yes!" "No!"

she exclaimed, pretending to be annoyed; "I am not engaged to any one, and certainly not to Malcolm. Who—who said that I was?"

"A very good friend of yours—never mind his name—said that he had heard so. It was very indefinite, you see, and really amounts to nothing."

"I am sure it was Mr. Orcutt—was it? Oh, I don't mind him! He says so much in a day that he contradicts himself a dozen times. One evening, while talking to me, he was trying to convince me that the moon was inhabited by people like ourselves—the same evening I overheard him endeavoring to prove to Sadie Rollins that it was a physical impossibility that the moon should be inhabited at all. It must have been his chosen stock-subject for that evening. But truly," she continued, "I think it does a girl infinite harm to be talked about in that way. I shall teach Mr. Orcutt a lesson."

"I am glad it is not true," he said gravely.

"Why?" she asked, taking the opposite side in the argument. "Why? I want to

know! Isn't Mr. Styrges good enough for me? What have you against him?"

"Nothing at all."

"Is that all you have to say? What has come over you, Gerald? Can't you talk? Why don't you entertain me? You needn't suppose that you can come here and sit listening to me all the afternoon. I shall go out driving with Win if you don't make even a polite attempt to be pleasant."

She had a strong suspicion that he had a great deal to say if only he would, and she intended to give him the opportunity. It was for this she had been waiting, and she promised herself to enjoy it thoroughly.

"When a man cannot talk, it is because he has something on his mind." She had abandoned her air of ill-humor and spoke in a low, sympathetic voice. "I did not mean to be disagreeable, Gerald; it was mean of me. Has something gone wrong? Won't you tell me what it is?" leaning toward him; "or don't you trust me?"

"It is about you, Sylvia," he said seriously, "so of course I trust you. I love you, I have loved you for ever so long. I could

hardly keep from telling you this a long time ago, and it was only because I felt sure there was something between you and Malcolm that I was able to keep silent. Now that I can speak to you without doing him any wrong, I tell you that I love you with my whole soul and I ask you to marry me. I can't say more, Sylvia. I don't know if you ever could care for me, but I must ask you and hear for myself."

He did not hesitate, he did not raise or lower his voice; but he spoke passionately and with a strength that made his words sink deeper than she had believed possible. She felt pleased, but it was not the pleasure that she had anticipated; it was not the pleasure of seeing one more human creature pay tribute to her power. It was a new sensation—it was the knowledge that she was loved for herself and in spite of herself. She lay back in her low chair, and closing her eyes she thought. She did not love Anthony and she never had; but at this moment she wished with all her heart that she did. As it was, she would have been willing to marry him had she not set her

mind upon winning Styrges. After all, where was the difference? Why waste her future in trying to win one man, while here was another who loved her so well? Was it worth the struggle?—should not she do better in accepting Gerald? Just then another new sensation awoke in her breast—pity and respect for the man whom she did not love. She resolved to perform one of the very few generous actions of her life and reject him for the sake of his own happiness: for she partly understood what must be the misery of being tied to a woman who did not return the love of her husband.

"Gerald," she said softly, "I don't love you. I wish I did, and then I would marry you gladly; but I do not. I respect you more, I think, than any man I ever knew; but respect is not love, and I don't believe I am capable of loving any man." How hard it was; how different from what she had expected! She glanced at him and saw that the rosy color left his cheeks; but still he held up his head bravely and looked at her. She felt sorry for him; and yet she had a strange consciousness that she was doing

what was best for him. "Perhaps I m
you think that I cared for you—if so
the first time in my life I confess that I
wrong. Will you forgive me? It hurts
to tell you this—oh! Gerald, really I m
it! I am so sorry!"

He took her hand and kissed it. "
right, Sylvia," he said cheerfully, thougl
was pale as death; "I hardly thought
could care for me, but I wanted to kr
Forgive you, dear! What is there to
give? Even if you had hurt me a thous
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The strange, unfamiliar pain at her h
grew, oh! so much worse! so that she cc
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than tempted—to accept him after all
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the feeling that she had set herself to
Malcolm, kept her from speaking. I
moment it was too late.

"Sylvia," he said in quite his natural t
"will you make me a promise?"

"I promise, before you tell me what it

"No, wait till you hear. I don't want to go through all this pain again, I don't intend to ask you again if you love me and will marry me. . . . I might be mistaken once more and think that you cared for me when you don't. . . . It would be hard for us both. I have told you now, once and for all, something that will always be true—that I love you. I think you know that I am always sure of myself, don't you? What I want you to promise is that if you ever feel that you can say 'yes,' you will write to me. Will you promise me, dear? Don't let any false pride stand between us: what I have said to-day will be just as true ten years from now, so why should you refuse to answer my question any more then than now? Will you do this for me?"

"Yes, Gerald," she said softly. "I wish I could say more to make you happy. Don't wait for me, don't count on me, don't hope for anything. Let us be friends as before, just the same good friends as ever."

He rose to leave; and she, acting on a strange impulse, went and stood in front of him and raised her lips to his. He kissed

her tenderly, lingeringly, then turned and left.

As for Sylvia, she went upstairs to her room and began to arrange her hair. Suddenly she felt a smarting in her eyes; then throwing herself on the bed, she sobbed and sobbed. She did not understand herself; she had expected pleasure, and unwittingly she had found pain. She was not a heartless woman; she was only spoiled and indulged, and she had not yet learned that other people besides herself had hearts and feelings. Gerald had revealed to her something in her nature of which hitherto she had been entirely ignorant—it had been but a glimpse, but she would never forget it.

CHAPTER III.

CRAIK ORCUTT had known Miss Heslow for a number of years. He had always shown her the better side of his nature—or, more properly speaking, he had been careful to conceal from her the faults which had made him unpopular with most people—with the result that Margaret considered him quite a friend of hers and treated him as such. She knew that he could be disagreeable at times, for he occasionally let slip a caustic remark about one or another of their acquaintances. But as he had never been rude to her, she had paid very little attention to what he said of others. Not that she ever joined with him in these efforts to ridicule other people, for she made a semi-conscientious effort to discourage him in it—for all that, he was amusing; but knowing him so long and, as she believed, so well, she had come to regard his remarks as purely good-natured criticisms.

Orcutt rarely did anything without a def-

inite purpose: he was too strong in the habit of self-indulgence to put himself to any inconvenience unless he hoped to gain something in the end. It was a bit of self-denial to control his tongue when with Margaret Heslow, and the object to be won was Margaret herself. He had enough knowledge of her nature to know that she would not tolerate or enjoy ridicule at the expense of her friends, for she was herself too honest and truthful. He did not love her, but he came as near to it as was possible for one of his self-centred nature. She just escaped being handsome, she was good-tempered and well educated, and she would make a splendid showing as his wife at the head of his table; and, above all, she seemed to like him at least to that extent which was necessary between man and wife. He had been in no hurry to force matters to a conclusion, for he believed that a man could always marry, could always choose his own time for taking the step. Then, too, there was no cause for haste; for Margaret did not show any particular liking for any one else, and the existing state of affairs was very pleasant. If

a rival had appeared, Orcutt would have felt very differently: he was as jealous of Margaret as he was of his opinions, and he would long ago have taken precautions to secure her for himself.

He called on Margaret very frequently, not because he considered it necessary that she should continually be reminded of his existence, but because he really enjoyed listening to her talk and, perhaps, because she was the only girl who seemed to like him for his own sake. He called to see her on the same afternoon that Gerald Anthony was at Sylvia Pelton's. Mrs. Rand was just coming out as he rang the bell.

"How do you do, Mrs. Rand?" he said effusively. "I hope last evening did not weary you?" He had removed his hat, and his right hand went up to his forehead and was unconsciously stroking it. Mrs. Rand always made him nervous, for he had an unpleasant feeling that she did not like him and he had resolved that she should like him. "There were ever so many nice people there, and I noticed that you were holding quite a levee."

Orcutt's right hand irritated her beyond measure. "There were a number of pleasant people in the room," she said crisply; "but one always finds one or two who are not so nice, and that leaves a bad impression on one's mind. As to being tired, no, not very, thank you; only one sometimes feels it more on the following day—say, in the afternoon."

It was very difficult for Mrs. Rand to be impolite to any one. But she really could not resist the temptation to give him one or two digs in his bump of conceit. She saw, to her disgust, that he had not noticed her covert sarcasm.

"Is Margaret at home? I should like to see her."

"Yes, Miss Heslow is in"—with emphasis. "I will tell her you are asking for her. Will you wait in the parlor for a moment?"

Mrs. Rand found Margaret in her room reading, and going over to her she kissed her affectionately.

"Why, what is it, Auntie? Why all this tenderness?" Margaret exclaimed, looking up and smiling.

"Mr. Orcutt is downstairs asking for you, Margaret. Are you going down to see him?"

"Why not? Of course I will see him! Why not? I expected him to-day. Tell him I will come right away."

"I wish you would not encourage Mr. Orcutt to call, Margie; I don't like him," she said earnestly. "To me he is always repulsive: there is something sneaking and underhand about him. Why will you see him, dear?"

"But it does me no harm, Auntie, even if he is all that you say. I have known him for so long, and he has always treated me well. I don't believe in sending away all one's friends just because they are not all one could wish them to be."

"I don't think he is your friend, Margaret —I really do not!"

"Why?"

"I think he wants you to marry him, dear. I don't want to put wrong ideas into your head, but I am almost positive that I am correct. And oh! Margie, I could not bear to see you the wife of that man!"

"You never will, Auntie," laughed Margaret. "If that is all, you may rest in peace: Mr. Orcutt is the last man I should dream of marrying. Besides—I give you my word—he has never acted in that way—the way you spoke of. He may think what he pleases, but he should know better than to speak to me of that. Now, Auntie, just run along and don't worry—you know I would not tell you what wasn't true."

Mrs. Rand was quite satisfied that Orcutt was powerless so long as Margaret did not love him, so she kissed her niece and went away contented. She stopped on her way out to tell Orcutt, who was impatiently waiting in the parlor, that Margaret would see him, and her voice was almost kindly. She was too good-hearted to remain long angry with any one, she could not cherish a dislike; she almost pitied Orcutt now that she knew his hopes were vain.

Margaret mused over Mrs. Rand's words as she was preparing to go downstairs. She knew that her aunt did not like Orcutt and that she did love her, Margaret, which easily accounted for her uneasiness. But

she did not believe that Orcutt's love for herself existed save in her aunt's imagination, for otherwise she would have suspected it or he would by this time have told her of it. Even granting that he did have some intention of asking her to marry him, it could do her no harm and could make no difference to her; she certainly did not love him; and as for being his friend, she did not even know if she were that. She had always treated him nicely because she believed in being pleasant to people, because, too, he had been kind to her and she wished to show him that she appreciated it. If he had any idea that she was interested in him, she told herself, it was the fault of his own conceit, not hers. So, her conscience being free, she hardly gave the matter a second thought as she descended the stairs and entered the parlor.

"Did you expect me, Margaret?" he asked when she was seated.

"I suppose you would come sometime today. I am glad you came early, for I am going to the Lesters' to dinner and have to leave at five o'clock."

She talked easily, unconsciously, as she would talk to any mere acquaintance. As she looked at Orcutt who sat all hunched up in his chair, stroking his forehead and listening to her with a perpetual smile of interest, she was inclined to burst out laughing at the idea that he was capable of feeling any sentiment concerning her. He looked so thoroughly complacent, so self-satisfied, that she could not imagine him tortured by the doubts and fears of love.

He, on his part, was not nearly so well satisfied as he looked. He had almost decided that to-day he would speak to her and ask her to marry him, and several times he had opened his lips to begin. Fate seemed to be against him, however; each time that he led the conversation up to the point at which he might take it in hand and say all that was in his mind, Margaret, with remarkable inconsiderateness, broke in with a perfectly irrelevant question which politeness obliged him to answer. He had something of the bull-dog in his tenacity of purpose; but nevertheless he began to lose courage: he took her unintentional interruptions in

the light of systematic attempts to check and warn him. He knew that he could easily break out with his declaration in spite of her opposition; but he wished to preserve some appearance of naturalness and to lead her to suppose that it had all happened fortuitously. He was not sure enough of her to risk a downright refusal. The afternoon was nearly gone, and still he had said nothing.

"Don't you think it disgraceful for a girl to marry without love, Mr. Orcutt?" she asked. They had been discussing the numerous marriages between American heiresses and foreign titles. "It seems to me a sin on one's soul to promise to love, honor and obey a man for whom one can feel neither love nor honor—it is nothing more nor less than acting a lie during one's whole life."

"And if, on the other hand, you loved a man with all your heart, would you marry him no matter what he was?"

"Oh, I don't know, Mr. Orcutt," she answered, now a trifle bored by the subject. "I don't think about marriage from a per-

sonal standpoint, for I expect never to marry. Suppose we do not talk about what I would or would not do?"

"But I want to hear your answer, Margaret," he said, leaning forward and looking at her intently. "There is something I want to say to you."

Her aunt's words recurred to her instantly; and more from a desire to avoid any argument with him than from any sense of embarrassment or feeling of pity for him, she interrupted—

"Do you think you can remember it until I get my hat and coat? It is time I should start for the Lesters'," she said, glancing at the clock; "and I am going to walk up."

"May I walk with you?" he asked.

"Just as you please," she said carelessly. "I'll be down in a moment."

He pondered long and deeply while waiting for her to return. Decidedly, he could not propose to her in the street! He even doubted if he would propose should he have another chance before they left the house, for he was losing courage. Even now, it

did not occur to him that she did not want him to speak at all; he merely concluded that she had resolved not to be hurried and would make him wait until some other time. He was willing enough to wait, so he decided to postpone his declaration indefinitely. Very naturally he was annoyed that he should be made to alter his resolution; but he took her opposition as a warning to give her time. He even gathered some hope from this thought, after the first disappointment had worn away; it showed that she knew his intentions and hesitated from natural embarrassment at the prospect. It did not occur to him that he might be blinding himself with his own conceit.

Margaret returned presently and they walked up Madison Avenue. It was a bright, clear afternoon, with just enough crispness in the air to make a brisk walk agreeable. Orcutt soon recovered his good spirits and talked quite cheerfully. As for Margaret, she was not thinking of him nor of any one else, but of the beautiful spring day. She was full of animal spirits, enjoying the bright sunlight, the blue sky, and the bracing air.

Orcutt was but a companion, a "thing," th
walked by her side and to which she cou
express her thoughts. He did not enjoy t
walk in the same way as she, and she fou
him unsympathetic; he could not enjoy f
walking, he did not admire the weather, a
he execrated the mud that a shower of t
morning had left on the crossings.

"You are always grumbling, Mr. Orcut
she exclaimed impatiently, when he h
complained of the effect that mud had up
trousers. "You have a perfect day, lots
sunshine and fresh air, and a talkative co
panion—yet you are not satisfied!"

"I may have all that you mention; but
the same time, that is no reason why o
should be obliged to paddle in mud. Nov
should think that it ought to be easy enou
to keep these streets clean and neat."

"That may be true. But if you want
enjoy one thing, you must always make
your mind to put up with something el
not quite so pleasant. I have some inf
mation for your ear—Mr. Styrges and M
Pelton are not any more engaged than y
are yourself."

Orcutt was slightly taken aback. He was not usually jealous; but some feeling of caution had prompted him before introducing Styrges the evening before to tell her that he was engaged to Miss Pelton, thus lessening somewhat the risk of her taking more than an ordinary interest in him. He always fancied that other people were like himself in having a motive for everything they did. And now, with her usual love of truth, she had set herself to discover the facts of the case.

"Truly?" he stammered. "Well, you know everybody says that they are—and I, for one, believe it, even if the engagement is not announced yet. I wonder that you asked me to introduce him," he added with a trace of sarcasm.

"Why should not I ask you, if I wanted to meet him? It may not be the usual thing to do; but what's the use of having a friend if you can't ask a favor of him? You know I don't speak like this very often; but you really do make me angry when you talk such nonsense. If I see Mr. Styrges again, I shall tell him that I asked you to present

him to me, and then I shan't fear that you will tell him yourself."

"This is rather cruel of you, Margaret," he said deprecatingly. "You don't suppose I would tell any of your little secrets to any one, do you?"

"I don't suppose, in the first place, that you know any of 'my little secrets,' as you call them—I am sure this is not one! I don't want to quarrel with you, Mr. Orcutt," she said more calmly, "but I will not permit you to be impudent. Now I have said more than I intended and I am sorry!"

Orcutt felt crushed: not, be it understood, because he felt conscious of being rude; but because he saw that he had offended her. He was determined to efface the bad impression he had made by feigning great humility.

"I know, Margaret, that I was very fresh, but I spoke only in a joking way. You surely will try to forget it and will forgive me?"

"Oh, you were forgiven long ago! It must be that I am very spoiled," she said, apologetically, "because I never had a mother

and father to bring me up in the way I should go, and so I give way to my temper."

"When did your mother die?—do you mind telling me?"

"When I was a tiny thing. My father died when I was not more than six months old, and my mother died soon after." She had apparently forgotten Orcutt's very existence. "There was some mystery about my father's death, but I never heard what it was. My mother—" she checked herself and looked at him. "But this can't possibly interest you very much. Stop me when I begin to monopolize the conversation."

"Indeed, I like to listen to you. I wish you would not stop."

He spoke the truth—he was very anxious that she should continue to talk on this subject. His was a suspicious and a prying nature, and he had an idea that there was some fact in connection with her father of which she was ignorant or, knowing which, she wished to conceal. He was inclined to believe that she knew nothing beyond the fact of the existence of some secret; now, from the way she spoke, he grew quite posi-

tive. Once before she had referred to l father in the same way—indefinitely; a his suspicions had been aroused. Then had asked old Phœnix Atwood, who kn everybody, about Mr. Heslow, and Atwo had practically told him to mind his o business. Orcutt did not attach great i portance to his discovery, for it made difference to him if there was a skeleton the Heslow family closet; but he menta jotted it down as a memorandum for futu reference. At present he could discover more, for Margaret stopped in front of house and held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Orcutt; you are ve good to walk up with me. Come in and s me again."

"Not in the least—I mean, not in t least good. Good-bye, Margaret; do forget that I have something important say to you some day."

She apparently did not hear his last mark, for she was halfway up the steps a did not look back. He hesitated a mome then turned and hailed a downtown car. was as well, he thought, that she shou

pect his intentions; for if, as he almost be-
ed, she had made up her mind to accept
, she might now feel certain of the future.
he did not care for him, it would make
little difference whether she knew his
ntions or not, for he was equally deter-
ed to win her in either case. She puz-
him, in one way—she always kept him
distance in spite of their long friendship;
ad always called her Margaret, but she
ld never call him anything but "Mr.
itt." He was not capable of under-
ding that it was perfectly natural for
to treat him in this way; if she was in-
rent to him, it was hardly likely that
would treat him any better than the
of her acquaintances; if she loved him,
would assuredly conceal the fact from

Orcutt's great consolation was in the
r hypothesis, he had too much conceit
e that her indifference was genuine and
fected.

e was quite well satisfied with himself
all. There was only one little scheme
s contriving that had miscarried—that
his idea of stating that Styrges was en-

gaged. He had not wished to introduce Styrges to Miss Heslow, and it was only because she had insisted that he had complied with her request. He had conceived the plan of lessening her interest in Styrges by telling her that he was engaged to Sylvia. He had managed it very clumsily; instead of telling her after they had been introduced, he had given her an opportunity of speaking about it to Styrges himself; and now that she had discovered the truth, her interest in him would be greater than if Orcutt had told her nothing. He was so jealous of her that he was forever guarding against any interference with his plans by the appearance of another man on the scene. Well, if he could not succeed with her, he would lessen Styrges' good opinion of her by telling him that she had asked for an introduction. This bit of information would probably displease Styrges, for he was a man who disliked being run after by women, and he would be almost certain to avoid her in future.

Orcutt left the car in the neighborhood of the Madison Square Garden and walked to

his club. As he entered the smoking-room he saw the very man of whom he had been thinking. He had never known Styrges well, but he had known him for a long time, and he felt free to cross the room and find a chair near him. Styrges looked around and nodded to Orcutt, and then went on with his cigar and his meditations.

"Hallo, Styrges," he said pleasantly; "waiting for some one? So am I. Is this chair taken?"

"No, sit down," said Styrges politely. "Will you try a cigar?"

"Thank you, I will. I have just seen a new acquaintance of yours, Styrges, and she wanted to be remembered to you. No," he said chuckling, "not Miss Pelton. It was Miss Heslow."

"Really? That is very good of Miss Heslow," replied Styrges indifferently. "I met her only last night, you know—by the way, it is you I should thank for the pleasure of an introduction. It was very kind of you."

"You ought to thank her for that, Styrges. For I confess I should never have thought

of it had she not begged me to bring you over."

"That is still better," said Styrges quietly. "But tell me—is it usual among gentlemen to reveal such little details as these?—especially as they are frequently a mark of the woman's confidence in the man's discretion. If a woman asks a man to present her to some other man, she generally takes it for granted that he is possessed of sufficient good taste to keep his knowledge to himself. At least, so I imagined. It seems that I am mistaken."

"What do you mean?" asked Orcutt angrily.

"You know what I mean. Now another thing—I must distinctly ask you not to spread any report of my engagement to Miss Pelton, since such a report would be absolutely untrue. I think it is quite sufficient to say, in explanation of my request, that it is not on my own account I ask it, but on hers."

"I! I only mentioned in conversation what I heard everywhere."

"Very well. I deny the report for her and for myself, and I ask you to refrain from

repeating anything else. Now let the matter rest. How are you, Gerald?" as Anthony came into the room. "Shall we take a short walk before dinner?"

The two men left the club and sauntered aimlessly up the Avenue. The street was almost deserted, save for a few belated workmen and weary dressmakers' apprentices. Styrges was still angry at Orcutt for his lack of fine feeling and his interference in other people's affairs. He had often been irritated by Orcutt's manner, and yet he had controlled his temper; now he had spoken his thoughts and he felt proportionately relieved. He did not intend to quarrel further with Orcutt, but simply to treat him with more politeness and less cordiality. It might have been thoughtlessness—it could hardly have been malice—that had led Orcutt to talk so much more than he should have done, and Styrges resolved to try to look upon it in the former light.

Then his thoughts turned to Anthony. He looked at his companion's face, but could gather nothing of his thoughts, for he wore the same placid expression as usual.

He resolved to ask him point-blank about his success that afternoon.

"Why are you so quiet? Did you have any luck to-day, Gerald?"

Anthony started slightly. "Yes, wretched luck," he said smiling. "What's the use of beating about the bush! You know as well as I do that I love Sylvia, don't you?" Styrges nodded. "I guess you know why I didn't tell her before, too. Well, she has refused me." He looked at his friend and smiled, but he saw no answering smile on Styrges' face. "I don't talk about myself much—but it's pretty hard!"

Styrges shook Anthony's hand. "I am very, very sorry, old fellow. You are one of the best men I ever knew, and I feel more sorry still to think it is you who have the hard luck. I wish I could help you—but that is impossible."

"There goes a girl home from work: I suppose she has some one whom she loves as well as I love Sylvia, and he is probably a great, hulking fellow, with coarse hands, and swears like a trooper. And yet, he is happier than I, because she loves him. Oh,

pshaw!" he exclaimed, "I wish I had been born a hod-carrier or a messenger-boy, or anything else but what I am! In that class if a fellow loves a girl a week after he first meets her, he can tell her so without violating any of the proprieties and can find out whether she loves him in return or not—he does not wait two years only to be disappointed in the end! I wonder if love pays? I wonder if the pleasure is worth the misery."

"Don't be foolish, Gerald. I'll tell you what, though: It would do you infinite good to let yourself go and swear for an hour. You can take my word for it, however, that you are not the only unhappy person in New York—I am not very happy, for one."

"You! Why, you have nothing to be unhappy about! You are not in love, are you?—and you don't want to be, I can tell you!"

"You are growing foolish again, Gerald; you talk like a boy. No, the trouble with me is that I am not in love, and I wish I were. It seems heartless to talk about it to you, but I wish you would let me talk. I want your advice. It is about Sylvia."

"Go ahead! I don't mind talking about her, especially to you."

"You know the report is in every one's mouth that I am engaged to her, when in fact I am not. Now I don't love her in the least; but, at the same time, I am aware that I have outwardly been very attentive to her. Do I owe it to her to ask her to marry me?"

Anthony winced perceptibly. "I am afraid you do, Malc," he said huskily. "I thought it all along. I had very little hope that she would take me, but I am almost sure that she loves you. Malc," he exclaimed, "you are an awfully good fellow." If it were any one else but you, I should want to choke him; but, although I know it ends my hopes, I must advise you to offer yourself."

"You know I don't love her, Gerald. But this is all my own fault, and I can't let the girl's chances be injured through my blindness and selfishness. I hoped that you might have her, for you are the one who really does love her, and I hope so still. I don't want her to accept me; but if she

does, no one will know the truth besides ourselves. I think I shall leave you here and go home ; so good-night."

"Good-night, Malc," said Anthony, grasping his hand.

He stood for a moment watching Styrges disappear down the side street, then continued his walk uptown. He was very brave, and he possessed a keen sense of loyalty to his friends; but somehow he had never felt so utterly broken down, had never experienced such anguish as he did now. That afternoon he had been refused by the woman he loved most dearly in all the world; and now he saw, almost as a certainty, that she was about to give herself to his dearest friend. Another thought that added to his misery was that he might have prevented this from happening had he advised Styrges differently. He knew that Styrges was, in a measure, bound to Sylvia; and yet, on reflection, he was obliged to admit that the affair was not so bad as he had at first thought. The truth was that Anthony had been influenced by two motives, unselfishness and pride. He was quite positive in his

belief that Sylvia loved his friend, and he was unselfish enough to wish that he, Anthony, might help her to gain her happiness. He had also exaggerated Styrges' obligations and duty to Sylvia, because he feared to seem prejudiced in his friend's eyes by his own regard for her. Curiously enough, he hardly gave a thought to the other side of the question, for Styrges' assertion that he did not love Sylvia made little or no impression upon Anthony.

He walked until he was tired in body as he was in mind. Regard it as he would, he saw only that his one glimpse of happiness was past and gone, that Sylvia was lost to him. He realized it fully, he was able to reason it out in all its aspects: there was no sense of numbness, of pain and unhappiness dull and heavy, but mercifully indefinite. It was the sense of one sharp, piercing truth that was infinitely harder to bear—the truth that Sylvia could never be his. His was a strong courageous nature, quiet but firm: yet try as he would to forget, the prospect of a dull, dark, hopeless future would come to him.

There is great profit in contrast, for contrast is the glass that shows characters and actions in truer proportions. It is contrast that gives men a standard of right and wrong, of true and false, of the noble and the ignoble—it is by contrast that we gain a conception of God and the devil. Not that Anthony approached the divine nor Craik Orcutt the devilish; but the contrast existed, and it was a definite and a strong one.

It is sometimes difficult to place the finger upon the exact point where friendship has become love or dislike has changed to hatred. But the moment at which Styrges turned away from Craik Orcutt and left the club with Anthony marked a very decided change in Orcutt's feelings toward him. Orcutt had never liked Styrges very well, because he realized that the latter did not like him: Orcutt was jealous of him, and in accordance with his nature, went a step farther and positively disliked him. He never allowed his dislike to appear, of course, nor could he even find any particular excuse for showing it, had he wished; for Styrges'

treatment of him had hitherto been of the best.

But here, this very evening, Styrges had gone a little too far! He had spoken to Orcutt in very plain language, and Orcutt would not forget it. He continued to sit in his chair after Styrges had left, half dazed and very angry: he did not see the truth and justice of Styrges' words, he saw in them only an insult. Then he fell to stroking his forehead, and the action seemed to calm him. He began to cast about him for some mode of revenge. To fight was out of the question, of course—and besides, he was too cautious of his own safety to think of it without a shudder. No; it must be in some quieter way, though in one just as sure. Orcutt thought deeply: he could not injure Styrges' reputation—at least, not enough to give any satisfaction; he could not rob him of the woman he loved, for he did not know that any such existed. . . Ah! he had it! He would make Styrges marry the woman he did not love—Sylvia Pelton! It might not be any revenge at all; and again, it might prove to be the greatest—at all events

it was a step, and there was abundance of time to do something more later. Meanwhile, angry as he was, he resolved to act towards Styrges as though nothing had happened.

He was roused from his reverie by the entrance of a man of about his own age and height, but more heavily built than he, and with light hair and moustache.

"Ah! how are you, Pelton?" exclaimed Orcutt, as the other approached his corner. "Sit down and have a talk. You are the very man I have been wishing to see."

"Thanks, I will have a cigar. What's the news? What did you want to tell me?"

"There is no hurry. Won't you have a bit of dinner here with me? Then we can talk it over."

"All right, much obliged, I will." Jack Pelton sank into a cushioned arm-chair and sighed contentedly.

Orcutt did most of the talking for the next half hour before they went in to dinner. He was always more at ease with Jack than with any other of his men acquaintances, because he fancied that Pelton rather liked

him; then, too, he knew Pelton and his weak points thoroughly and how to take advantage of this knowledge. Pelton's character might be hit off by one or all of the adjectives "careless," "indifferent," "happy-go-lucky." He was not a bad or a vicious man, yet he was far from being a manly man. He had the greatest love and respect for Winifred, his wife, but he showed it in his own peculiar way: he often said rude and unkind things to her, not because he meant to be rude or unkind, but because it was natural to him to make such speeches. If any one had accused him of being unfeeling and at times unjust, he would have been the most surprised and the first one to deny it. If he had heard another man speak to his wife as he sometimes spoke to Winifred, he would have been eager to teach him better manners. He was the same in respect to many other things, condemning others for faults which he himself possessed and could not see.

All this Orcutt knew. He knew also one other fact—that Pelton was fond of good-living, and that this taste, properly trained

and indulged, meant just a drop too much wine before dinner, at dinner, after dinner, or, in fact, at any time you please. This weakness was to Orcutt a possible means of using Pelton as he might wish. Pelton did not seek Orcutt's society particularly; but as the latter flattered him and made him think that he, Pelton, was altogether a fine fellow, he came by degrees to consider Orcutt quite an agreeable companion.

Orcutt knew well how to order a good dinner and what especial brands of wines were the most delicate. On this occasion he did himself great justice, as Jack Pelton affirmed. They chatted over their dinner with great good feeling, Orcutt making a great show of being confidential; and as the dinner progressed Pelton talked very freely indeed. He entertained Orcutt very well, and at the same time led the latter to hope that he would let fall a hint of some private family secret which might, in Orcutt's hands be turned to good account. But Pelton either had no secrets of any importance, or he was still too guarded in his conversation to reveal any that existed, for Orcutt learnt

nothing. There was an abundance of scandal, but it was all an old story to Orcutt and lacked the pungency which makes scandal desirable as a topic for discussion. Orcutt had kept his head perfectly clear, drinking but little, while he plied Pelton with wine until the latter had arrived at a state of infinite good-humor and jollity. The dining-room was now practically deserted save by themselves, and over the coffee Orcutt began to work out his attack.

"Styrges was in just before you came," he remarked. "He is a remarkably nice fellow, don't you think?"

"Of course—I always did like Malcolm. I see a great deal of him, you know; he comes to the house very often to see Sylvia —she's my sister—ho! ho!" he laughed; "why, of course you know she's my sister! How stupid of me!"

"I ought to know it, I've known her long enough. Between ourselves," Orcutt whispered confidentially, "I used to like Sylvia very well indeed."

"Why the devil don't you like her now?"

"I do," said Orcutt; "but not in the

same way, you see. I found out that she did not like me very much. I know Styrges admires her extremely."

Pelton nodded. "I shouldn't be surprised, old fellow, if that turned out a match some day."

"I always used to think so myself," said Orcutt musingly.

"'Used to think so!'" exclaimed Pelton, rousing himself. "Why don't you think so now? Why? Do you think he will change his mind about it now?"

"You misunderstand me, Jack. I thought you had heard that Malcolm has been very attentive to Miss Heslow, and I thought that possibly everything had been broken off with your sister by mutual consent. I beg your pardon for being so stupid."

"Look here, Orcutt!" said Pelton, now quite aroused. "Do you mean to tell me that Malcolm has been playing fast and loose with Sylvia?"

"Oh, by no means!" said Orcutt hastily. "I only judge by what I see and hear, Jack, and I may be mistaken—I hope I am."

"Well, come now! what do you see and

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hear? You must tell me"—as Orcutt hesitated.

"Only that Styrges is attentive to Miss Heslow and is not so attentive as formerly to Miss Pelton. I don't want you to take all that I say as evidence, for I probably know nothing about it, but since you asked me there is all that I know."

"I've noticed myself—though I tried not to see it—that Malcolm has fallen off a little of late. I tell you," he continued, striking the table, "I will not have Sylvia imposed upon; Styrges has been hanging around for a long time, and he has got to put an end to it one way or another."

"Oh, I wouldn't do anything if I were in your place," said Orcutt, taking the other side. He knew that this would arouse Pelton's anger more surely than if he agreed with him. "I have no doubt that Styrges has good reasons for waiting, and that he and Sylvia understand each other. I should wait if I were you."

"I'll wait a little while. But, by George!" he exclaimed, his anger returning, "that fellow is not a gentleman if he gives me

cause to wait long. I must be moving, Orcutt. Good-night—thanks for information and favors received."

Orcutt remained alone to smoke his cigar in a well satisfied frame of mind.

CHAPTER IV.

IT was a week after the conversation between Orcutt and Jack Pelton that Styrges for the first time bethought him of Miss Heslow's invitation to call. It had been a very unpleasant week so far as the weather was concerned; and as Styrges' was one of those natures that are greatly influenced by externals, the time had seemed long and dreary enough. He had no ambition to make himself forget gloomy surroundings, but abandoned himself, in the moments when he was not busy downtown, to a state of depressing self-contemplation. He knew very well that it was more than half his own fault that he was unhappy; but he accepted it as a spendthrift, who lives from hand to mouth, accepts the period of hardship and hard times that always follows a day of more than ordinary luxury and gayety—as an inevitable consequence of his own nature.

It did not occur to Styrges that there was as much to occupy his time and to distract his mind on a rainy as on a clear day—he simply expected to be amused, he did not purpose to amuse himself. He blamed everything and everybody but himself, and in the intervals between the abuse he smoked cigars and wished himself dead.

Styrges was undeniably foolish: he was radically wrong in his views, and he was as a result an extremely disagreeable companion for all who saw him during this week. He knew that he was each and all of these three things, and that to a greater extent than ever before. So he did what was perhaps the best thing he could do under the circumstances—isolated himself as much as possible from the society of his friends.

But there was one other cause of low spirits—the consciousness of a great and irretrievable mistake made in the past. The more he thought about Sylvia, the more did he hesitate to give her her due by asking her to marry him. Try as he might to be impartial in his judgment, he accused her in his thoughts of carrying out a skilfully laid

plan to entrap him into just the position that he then occupied; and these very doubts served only to make him chafe the more under the bonds of duty. At these moments he almost hated her.

It is no wonder that he hailed with almost unreasoning delight the first bright, clear day that seemed to be a true index of the coming spring. He left his office early, and on arriving uptown he remembered that he ought to call on Miss Heslow. He knew that there was an equally good reason why he should make Sylvia, whom he had neglected of late, the recipient of his first attentions; but he excused himself from the latter course by the thought that he could see her at any time, while to call on Miss Heslow was but an act of common politeness which he owed to her and to himself. He accordingly so timed his movements as to arrive at Mrs. Rand's at a little after four o'clock.

He asked for both Margaret and her aunt, and presently the former came downstairs to see him.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Styrges,"

—coming forward and extending her hand. "My aunt will be down shortly. We had begun to wonder if you had forgotten our existence."

"I felt some hesitation about coming to see you, for, if you remember, you did not second your aunt's invitation. I tried to persuade myself that I should be satisfied with your silence."

"I am delighted that you were so successful in the art of persuasion. Why should I have said anything? It was enough that my aunt spoke for us both. I assure you, you could easily have told had I wished not to see you."

"Do you know, it places a man in such unpleasant positions, this conventional politeness! I may be—in fact, I am—ever so anxious to know if you are at all pleased to see me; yet, by a few polite phrases, a woman can answer all questions and still leave a man completely unenlightened as to her real feelings. Besides, I think you would be too kind-hearted to tell a man a disagreeable fact, or too cruel to tell him a pleasant one."

"You are very conventional yourself, Mr. Styrges," she remarked. "You know very well that cruelty and kindness from one person to another depend almost wholly upon the moral influence that the one has over the other. You wish to be polite by making me suppose that my mental attitude toward you is of the highest importance to you. Do not you see that you are censuring yourself as well as womankind?"

"A truce to jesting! I assure you, Miss Heslow, I give you my word, that the good opinion and the good wishes of a woman whom he respects are, or ought always to be, of no slight importance to every man. After all, I grant you that beneath all conversation there is a certain existing truth founded on some principle of human nature. The disappointing part of it is that custom has rendered it the height of folly to speak the truth all at once and without the garniture of conventionality."

"I wonder if I follow you clearly, Mr. Styrges?"

"If you do not, it is my fault. I will tell you what I mean. We were speaking of my

wish to possess your good opinion. In the first place, I am truly anxious that you should be glad to see me—that is the truth; but I could not ordinarily tell you so without much circumlocution. In the second place, I am trying to discover if you are pleased or not at seeing me: you are prevented by custom from answering 'yes' or 'no.' In short, there is in the mind of each a definite purpose, a definite idea or feeling based on a certain truth, and this truth guides us, though it may be ever so imperceptibly, in all that we say on this particular subject."

"I believe my first speech on entering the room was that I was glad to see you."

"I know it was. But the reason you remember the fact so well is that it was said from habit. You see," he said smiling, "we do not properly rate the value of words; we speak without thought—and we are all the same."

"Think what a bore conversation would be, Mr. Styrges, if we pondered over what we were going to say before speaking!"

"Not in the least," he said quickly. "What I mean is that we should cease to

think so much of the form and learn to think more of the matter. It is an affair of years—though there are exceptions which prove the rule—for two people to understand each other. It was not so always. It may be a direct result, a consequence, of civilization ; but I call it a bad result, an evil."

"Is it a great mistake to keep to oneself an opinion that would cause pain to a fellow-creature?—to speak no evil of others, though one may personally despise and detest those others?—or, if it be necessary to tell a truth that injures another, is it a mistake to clothe it in words which will do the least possible injury? Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "The world is better as it is: experience has been a good teacher, and the world is learning slowly, but surely."

"Tell me, then, why it is that in a little country village, among ingenuous and good-hearted people, one can learn to know and to love one's friends and neighbors so well? Is it not very largely because such people do not know what it is to conceal their thoughts? —because each knows very clearly the posi-

tion which he holds in the thoughts of others? Is not this an illustration of the value of what I have just asserted?"

"I suppose there may be single practical instances of your idea. But I believe," she laughed, "that you will meet with many disappointments and make many enemies if you attempt to live up to your belief."

"If you mean to discourage a man from trying to live consistently with his belief, I have greatly misunderstood your character," he retorted.

"Nonsense! I know you are not really in earnest. If you were, you would not argue about it, you would act."

He laughed. "It is the misfortune of being human to be inconsistent. I will try to speak my thoughts 'free from guile'; and if I offend you, I shall have the pleasure of being a martyr to my convictions. I had hoped to find in you a convert to my way of thinking, for a certain reason. My mother intends to ask a few people to spend a week at our country-place near Rhinecliffe, and I have suggested to her that she invite you and Mrs. Rand. If you were a firm believer

in my principles of—of free speech and free action, shall we say?—you would not be prevented by mere custom from accepting, if you wished to come. What do you say, Miss Heslow? Will you try to convince yourself of the superior pleasure one derives from doing as one feels like doing?"

"Do you expect me to speak the entire truth?" she asked smiling. "If I should receive such an invitation from your mother, I am sure that I should want very much to accept it. The decision would, of course, rest with my aunt."

"And will you promise me that when the invitation is in her hands you will try to induce her to accept?"

"If I myself want to accept it, naturally I will try to persuade her. Is that enough to satisfy you?" she asked with mock gravity.

"With the exception of the 'if'—that devil's blight on hope! (pray pardon the intensity of expression)—I am perfectly content for the present."

"Who are to be there, if I may ask?—you know I am to speak my thoughts."

"I believe my mother intends to ask

Gerald Anthony, Jack Pelton and his wife, Sylvia Pelton, and"—his face clouded—"Craik Orcutt. They are all people whom you already know."

"That reminds me that I have a confession to make to you, Mr. Styrges."

"To me? Why in the world to me?"

"It is about you. I hope it does not come too late," she went on; "I am afraid some one else has been too quick for me. I want you to know that it was I who first suggested to Mr. Orcutt that he should present you to me the other evening. I was afraid that you would consider it very peculiar, to say the least, if you heard it from another. Mr. Orcutt teased me by threatening to tell you himself." She spoke easily and unaffectedly, as though she were but wishing him "many happy returns;" but it pleased him. "I hope he has not told you—has he?"

"Even if he had, it would be none the less pleasant news, Miss Heslow," said Styrges quickly; "and coming from yourself it gives you a twofold claim on my gratitude. No!" he continued. seeing that she was about to interrupt; "I want you to believe me. I—

I do care——" He stopped suddenly. What was this girl to him that his voice should be so earnest?—that he should speak to her as he had never before spoken to any girl, even to Sylvia? He hardly knew what he had been about to say, yet he felt that he had just escaped committing a grave mistake. At the least she would have thought less of him, because she would not, could not in reason, believe him. But he was not the man to run away while he could still fight. The pause was but for an instant. "The fact is," he said naturally, "Mr. Orcutt did tell me; but I could hardly hope that it was so until you said so yourself."

"I supposed he would," she said. "He and I are old acquaintances, and he loves to annoy me. What is the good of being angry with him! I am glad if you don't think it an odd thing of me to do. *You* ought to excuse it, you know, because it is an example of the trouble one gets oneself into by doing as one wants to do," she laughed.

"I see that you will eventually agree with me that free speech is the best course," he rejoined.

The conversation was made general by the entrance of Mrs. Rand, who expressed herself as delighted to see Styrges. He was greatly tempted to broach the subject of his mother's proposed outing-party, but decided to leave the task of talking over Mrs. Rand to Margaret, who understood her.

They had been talking but a short while when the bell rang, and in walked Craik Orcutt, smiling and self-satisfied. Styrges, who had previously had no wish to leave, now rose. His hopes of another quiet chat with Margaret were now but dust and ashes. Orcutt shook hands with Miss Heslow and her aunt, and then held out his hand to Styrges.

"Hello, Malcolm!" he said with ineffable calmness. "Haven't seen you for a week. How are you?"

Styrges was for a moment doubtful how to meet these overtures. He was more than ever disgusted with the fellow for his indifference to snubbing and for his unconquerable cheek; but he could see no object in making an enemy of him. Besides, there was but one course open to him in the pres-

ence of Miss Heslow, and that was to b polite. He took the other's proffered hand

"How do you do, Orcutt?" he replied and was about to pass on.

"Your mother has just invited me t visit you at Rhinecliffe, Malc," Orcutt con tinued.

"And are you coming?" asked Styrges as courteously as he might.

"Yes, thanks; I think I shall. They hav a splendid old place up there, Miss Heslow,' he said turning to her. "Such picturesqu walks along the river and among the hills!'

"Curse his stupidity!" muttered Styrge to himself as soon as he was outside th front door.

As he walked slowly home, Styrges, i thinking of Miss Heslow and himself, soo forgot to be angry with Orcutt. Assuredly, he had felt and acted very strangely tha afternoon! He was not anything to her no was she anything to him; and yet, he ha seen just enough of her nature to make hi admire her and wish that he might call he "friend." Styrges was just in the mood t imagine that he stood in need of sympathy

at he would like to tell his perplexities to me one who could feel with him and for im. Friend! Did not he begin to feel that n not meeting Margaret Heslow but a little ime sooner he had missed something!—something that might be more than mere sympathy and friendship?

The more he thought over that afternoon, or tried not to think of it—it was all the same—the more did he regret that certain relation to Sylvia into which he had fallen. Reason and excuse himself as he might, that obligation to Sylvia was daily growing to be a definite, fixed quantity which must be a factor in the scheme of his life. But he felt equally certain that Margaret also, whether as a known or undetermined quantity, would play a part. He was not in love with Margaret, of that he was confident: it was absurd, in the first place; and he wondered if, were he in love with her, he would not throw all duty to the winds. What troubled him was that he could not feel indifferent toward her, as he felt toward other girls; could not treat her the same as he treated others; could not reason away that idea that had

crept into his mind, that he had lost s thing.

His mother had asked Sylvia to dine them that evening. She had stoppe Sylvia early in the afternoon, and tog they had driven to the stores to do shopping and then uptown and aroun Park. Styrges did not know this unt entered the dining-room and saw the ladies there. Had his mother but kno this was the worst course she could taken to further her plans of maki match. Styrges had wished to see no least of all Sylvia; and to have her forced upon him made him resolve t only the more obstinate. He tried n show his discontent; but it was impos for him to take an interest in the conv tion, and unless he was spoken to h mained silent.

"Mother," he remarked, as they rose the table; "I called on Mrs. Rand this a noon and I spoke to Miss Heslow about invitation. I hope you will send it soo

"I had not fully decided to ask t Malcolm," said Mrs. Styrges dryly.

course I must now. Only I wish you had waited to consult me. There are so many other people we might have invited. Sylvia, won't you sing for us a little?"

Styrges knew what that meant—that he and Sylvia were to be left *en tête-à-tête*. Sylvia assented, not too eagerly, yet not too reluctantly, and he soon found himself turning over the leaves for her. His mother had retired to the library to read.

Sylvia sang unusually well for one who had never taken lessons. Her voice was light and naturally pleasing, and she managed it well; but she lacked soul, she had no feeling. She sang as she had heard others sing, delicately and in tune, and she had the good taste to avoid notes of which she was not absolutely certain; but her singing lacked the charm of individuality. In conversation, in manner, in a certain personal charm, Sylvia was Sylvia, and none other; but in singing Sylvia was only a bit of mechanism, delicate and good of its kind, but still belonging to a class.

There had been a time, not so very long ago, when Styrges had been perfectly con-

tented while listening to Sylvia play a
sing. Now he was simply bored; now
was wondering how that same love-sc
would sound when sung by Margaret Hesl
in that deep, rich voice that had so thril
him. He lost himself in vague speculati
letting his thoughts roam whither th
would, but always returning to Margai
Twice already he had failed to turn t
leaves for Sylvia at the proper time. S
had said nothing. But now he crowned
mistakes with one inexcusable blunder:
turned two leaves at once and did n
notice it.

"Don't you want me to sing, Malc?" s
asked in a pained voice, looking up at hi

He saw at once that he had really wounc
her. "I am so sorry, Sylvia, ever so sor
Of course I want you to sing, only I v
eareless. Won't you forgive me?"

She had hard work to keep the tears fr
her eyes, but she finished the song. S
would not sing any more, however; thou
he, truly penitent, begged her to do so.

"I had much rather you should come a
talk to me," she said brightly enough, si

ing down among some cushions on a divan at the farther end of the room. He followed her and took a seat near her. "Why have you neglected me for so long, Malc?" she asked in a low voice.

"I was very busy and very blue last week, Sylvia, and you would have found me very poor company. I did not see a soul for a week."

"You never used to let a week pass without seeing me," she remarked quietly. "I hoped you would come this afternoon."

"I owed Miss Heslow a call—and you know, duty comes before pleasure," he said rather lamely. "I fully intended to see you to-morrow at the latest."

Sylvia understood perfectly well that he had not been anxious to see her; she perceived, too, that her hold on him was now of the slightest, and that it would take very little to make him revolt. But she trusted in his sense of honor and in the belief that there was no rival in her way. Still, there was just the least little fear in the world that Miss Heslow might in time develop into a rival. She knew that the worst step she

could possibly take would be to show any jealousy. Still the temptation to sound his feelings was too strong for her to resist.

"I can't understand why you should have selected Miss Heslow to call on first," she said after a pause. "There are crowds of others to whom you owe calls more than to her, I am sure. Why, you met her only the other night! What did you talk about? Is she nice with men?"

Styrges could not repress a slight movement of impatience. "If I like the girl, Sylvia, and should feel pleased to know her better, there is every reason why I should reply to her aunt's invitation by calling there as promptly as I am able. Besides," he could not resist saying, "I may have anticipated a more agreeable reception there than I should find at some other places."

"Now you are displeased, Malc," she said, leaning forward and resting her hand on his arm. "Don't think I am inquisitive or rude; only I was disappointed when you did not come to see me." She withdrew her hand as though just realizing what she had been doing, and continued gently: "You are the

only friend I am sure of, Malc; and I, too, have had the blues and I wanted some one to come and drive them away, You don't think less of me for saying this?"

His ill-humor had vanished and he was ready and willing to make amends—only he did not want to discuss Margaret Heslow with Sylvia.

"You must forgive me once more, Sylvia; I have been very rude. You asked what we talked about? A number of things, just the usual small topics."

"And will she really visit you at Rhinecliffe?"

"I hope so," he said. "She is very nice, Sylvia: you ought to know her better."

"How you do talk about her!" she exclaimed. "Can't you think about any one or anything but Miss Heslow? I am afraid, Malc, that you are becoming much too interested in her—I shall be obliged to look after you."

He did not reply immediately. That was always the way. If he tried to be polite, Sylvia always pushed the conversation farther than was pleasant. He was very sorry

he had spoken about Margaret. Who had begun it? Had he? After all, the safest and surest way was for him to ask Sylvia then and there to marry him—then it would all be over and he could not change his mind even though he might wish to.

"Sylvia," he began, "I want to ask——" He stopped. The words were cold, and his heart was cold toward her. What could he tell her?—not that he loved her, for he did not. And she would surely ask.

"Well?" She said it very gently. She thought she knew what he wished to say and why he hesitated.

No, he could not ask her to marry him, not in this fashion. He must wait a little longer and give himself one more chance. He fancied himself saying, "Sylvia, will you marry me?" just in the tone in which he would remark, "Jack and Jill went up the hill." No, he could not ask her yet.

"Excuse me, Sylvia, that was very forgetful of me—but I don't remember what I was going to say."

For a moment it was all she could do to keep back her tears. She had felt quite

sure that at last he was about to say that which she had been longing to hear, and her heartbeats had grown quicker. And then—to have another disappointment. She could not endure it any longer.

"It is time for me to go, Malc," she said steadily, rising from the sofa. "Will you see me safely home, like a good old fellow? or shall I borrow one of the maids? Perhaps you have another engagement to keep?"

"Of course I will—but you mustn't go yet. You have only just come."

"Truly, I must go. You don't mind the trouble? Good-bye, Mrs. Styrges. It is very good of you to ask me here."

"Are you going already, Sylvia?" asked Mrs. Styrges, surprised. "You shouldn't leave yet. Have you and Malc been quarrelling? Never mind, dear," she whispered, seeing that her son had retired to the hall; "just be patient for a time. I understand your feelings. I hope it may be all right."

"Oh, don't, Mrs. Styrges! I don't want to say anything about it. Thank you so much, just the same. Good-night, dear," she said brightly, kissing her.

She ran upstairs for her coat and hat and left Styrges waiting in the hall. Presently his mother came to the parlor door.

"Malcolm," she said quietly, "will you come here for a moment? I want to say something to you."

He complied immediately. He hoped there was not to be any scene; for though he might not be able to manage himself and his own affairs, he certainly was not going to let any one else manage them for him. His mother came up to him and put her arm about his neck as she used to do when he was a little boy and she wished to reason with him.

"Malc," she asked very gently, "do you love Sylvia at all?"

"Why?" he exclaimed, a trifle annoyed at her way of beginning.

"No matter why, Malc—only I want to know. Of course you don't have to tell me, my dear, if you don't want to."

Why could not people let him alone? Everything conspired to fling him into Sylvia's arms, to make him live a lie for the rest of his life, to make him promise to love

and cherish her when he could not. He felt singularly powerless to think and act for himself. What had he done that he should be so fully in the power of this particular fate?"

"No, I don't love her, mother," he said. As well to tell the truth now, even if he might never do so again. "I suppose I ought to. I like her very well as a friend; but I never did love her, and I don't believe I ever shall."

"Do you know, I believe she thinks you do, Malc. I am not judging from anything that has been said—don't suppose it. But I am sure she has expected more of you than this. Don't you think you owe something to her, Malc?"

"I intend to ask her some day if she will marry me," he said coldly, "and she may have me or not, as she pleases. I know, just as well as you do, that I am placed in a false position."

"I am so glad to hear you say this, Malc," she said kissing him. "I understand that it will be hard for you to speak to her, if you really do not care for her. But you don't

know Sylvia as well as I do—she will make you a very good wife."

"How do you know that I want a wife?" he asked, trying to laugh. "There are plenty of girls who would make good wives, provided that you wanted them. I do not. For each man there is only one woman whom he can love."

"Who is that, Malc?" she asked quickly.

"Oh, I have not found her yet," he replied carelessly. "I suppose I never shall, now. It seems there is but one choice."

"Why don't you ask her to-night?"

"I am not ready yet, mother. I tell you that I will ask her, and I mean it. But I do not intend to hurry or to be hurried. It will be bad enough if she accepts me and I am tied down to her for the rest of my life —then there will be abundance of time for reflection. I am tired of thinking about it now."

His mother was not entirely satisfied, but she kissed him again and said that she would be very happy to see him marry Sylvia.

Mrs. Styrges was not mercenary in her motives, for Sylvia had no money, and her

son had already all that he needed; nor was she cold-blooded in wishing to force Malcolm into this marriage, for she loved him and really desired his happiness. She had several reasons, however, which seemed to her sufficiently good. She was very fond of Sylvia and was anxious to see her happy. She had always felt toward Sylvia as a mother, not as a friend; and if Sylvia loved Malcolm and there was no serious difficulty in the way, she should have him. She did not on this account fail in her love for her son; but she had never understood him well, and had always supposed that he was fonder of Sylvia than was actually the case. Now that her eyes were opened, she still believed implicitly that she knew better than he wherein lay his happiness, and she supposed that all he needed was some one who should point out to him the best course to pursue in order to attain that happiness. She did not take into consideration that he was at least an able judge of what he did not want.

Sylvia asked him to walk instead of taking the car. She saw that she had failed to please him that evening, and she knew that

it was a mistake to inflict herself upon him while he continued in this mood. The temptation to be with him as long as possible, however, was too strong. She tried to amuse him by talking about everything that she supposed would be interesting to him. Though good-natured in his replies, he showed but little disposition to talk, and they finally allowed the conversation to drop. They had almost reached her door when he broke the silence.

"I wonder what duty really is?" he said, more to himself than to her.

"Duty, I suppose, is to discharge some of the many just debts that we owe to God and to man," she said, a little surprised.

"Yes," he mused, "it is easy enough to define it in the abstract, but not so easy in the concrete. Do you suppose that to do one's duty is always unpleasant? I wish I knew. I have always found it hard—only, perhaps, I am not very well used to doing my duty."

"It brings its own reward, Malc—so they say."

"But it's so much like a grab-bag—you

›n't know beforehand whether you will get ›ur reward or no. It all depends, I imag- e, upon one's conception of duty. Some- nes one thinks one is doing right, and it rns out to be wrong."

"Yes, it must be difficult to wait and atch for a compensation for doing what is ght," she answered. "You know they tell ; that we should be satisfied with the knowl- lge that we are doing what is right and not ok for a reward. I never did anything in y whole life from a sense of duty. I sup- ›se I have never had to—and I am not ›od enough, anyway."

"What I mean is that sometimes one can't ren have the satisfaction of knowing posi- vely that what one has done is right. In ıy case, Sylvia, I am at a loss to decide."

"Can I help you?" she asked, looking up t him. They had reached the steps of her ouse and had unconsciously paused to con- nue their subject.

"Perhaps you could," he said reflectively. Presuming that you were a man and asked girl whom you respected and admired, but id not love, to marry you, and presuming

that she accepted you, would you t
frankly that you did not love her?—o
you run the risk of letting her find it
herself? Is it your duty to tell her the
truth?"

"Why should I ask any girl to ma
Malc, if I did not love her?" she said
ing very pale.

"Because you would want to.
mind that."

She waited a moment before re
"I think it would be kindest to tel
she said faintly; "unless she knew
ready."

"If she did not care for the n
would make but little difference t
would it?" he continued, not hearir
"But if she loved him, it would hu
would it not?"

"Ye—yes! Good-night, Malcolm,
said hastily, and ran up the steps. S
inserted the key in the door and tu
before he reached her side.

"Sylvia, why are you going in s
hurry? Give me time to say good-ni
least."

She gave him her hand for a moment, but said not a word. Then she nodded to him and left him standing there in amazement. He had been thinking too much of himself and too little of her.

Winifred looked out from the parlor as Sylvia came in, but the latter hurried past her without a word. Upstairs she threw herself on the lounge and began to cry bitterly.

She knew now that he did not love her. What did it matter that she could have him if she wanted, when she could not have his love as well! If he did not love her now after all these years, he never would love her. She was fond of pleasure, frivolous, and thoughtless; but for all that she loved this one man just well enough to cry and feel hurt because he did not love her. She felt that her self-love, too, was aggrieved; she was not accustomed to give more than one thought to any man; least of all had she expected that her affection would not be valued when she did choose to bestow it. She was suffering to some extent precisely as in the past she had made others suffer.

But it was even more serious than this—

she loved Malcolm. That is, she liked him better than any man she had ever met, and she encouraged herself in liking him. She had, too, received encouragement from Mrs. Styrges, and all this had led her to look upon Malcolm as her own property. He might still be her "property," but he would never be anything more to her.

Winifred came upstairs, saw her lying there sobbing, and sat down by her side and tried to comfort her. Ah! she, too, knew what it was to have that heart-ache! She knew Sylvia's feelings toward Malcolm and guessed that there had been some misunderstanding, some trouble. She did not say anything, did not ask any questions, but just knelt by Sylvia and put her arms about her neck and waited for her to tell her trouble. Sylvia clung to her and cried more quietly for a time; then her tears ceased. But she did not speak to Winifred of her trouble: she was afraid that her advice would be to give him up, and that she could not do.

She was alone again. She tried to collect her thoughts and to decide upon what she

should do. Malcolm did not love her, but he was going to ask her to marry him. How thoughtless he had been in his questions! Would it always be so? Would she continually and forever be reminded that she was married to a man to whom she was nothing? He would be kind to her—oh, yes; he was always kind! But could she be happy on mere kindness? She felt that she never could be content. And as he plainly could give her nothing more, she ought to give him up.

She thought of Gerald Anthony and of all he had said. Ah! that was what she longed for in Malcolm. Why had not she given Gerald a different answer and given up striving after that which could never be hers? Would not that be the same thing reversed?—could she make Gerald happy when she had only kindness to offer him? Then she wondered if she would be so anxious to win Malcolm for herself, if she would love him so much, if he were more like the rest of men and not so hard to win. She even questioned if her heart were really interested: if it was not obstinacy that gov-

erned her—not real love. Why had Malcolm talked in that way about duty? What was her duty? Was it not to give him freedom? Clearly it was. He had resolved to do his duty—why did she hesitate to do hers? Was it as hard for him as for her? It must be that he found it easier than she—that was the reason.

So she pondered, first on one side of the question, then on the other, until her brain was in a whirl and she felt hot and feverish. When at length she sobbed herself to sleep she had not yet decided what she would do.

Not so with Styrges. He had left Sylvia with the firm resolve that he would do what he knew to be right, if only his courage and strength held out. Why he had not spoken that very evening he hardly knew. He liked to take his own time, and he wished, too, to give himself every chance.

He was walking slowly home, and unconsciously he turned toward Margaret Heslow's house. He stood on the opposite side of the street and looked up at the house, thinking—he hardly knew what. Just as he was about to turn away a light was turned up in

one of the rooms and a now familiar face appeared at the window and gazed out for a moment—then the curtains were drawn, and he was once more conscious of the cold, hopeless reality. He turned and walked slowly away. Once again he had dimly realized the meaning to him of that "might-have-been."

CHAPTER V.

THE next time that Styrges saw Sylvia was at a dinner at the Wests', three days later. He did not care particularly to go, but he had already accepted; besides, he knew that Sylvia expected to see him there. He had worked very hard and kept very busy during those three days in order not to have time to think, and he had at length gained greater confidence in himself and greater courage to accept the inevitable.

There was a great surprise in store for him. He was the last one to arrive. After greeting his hostess and exchanging a few commonplaces with Miss West, who made a desperate effort to keep him near her, he glanced around the room. The first person he saw was Miss Heslow, and just beyond her were Sylvia and her brother and Gerald Anthony. He had not expected to see Margaret—he had not, in fact, wished to see

her—until he had first said a few very important words to Sylvia. Was it a new test of his courage to which fate was about to subject him? He felt his heart beat violently when he first noticed Margaret; then she looked up, saw him and returned his bow. He excused himself to Miss West and crossed over to Sylvia.

"Good-evening, Malcolm," she said, giving him her hand. She did not seem like the same Sylvia: she was pale, and she did not look up at him and laugh as she used to do. "I was anything but sure that you were coming—you are so frightfully late."

"I came only on your account, Sylvia," he said in a low tone. "I must see you afterward somehow or other."

She knew, oh, so well! why he asked to see her. It was coming at last—and would she have the courage to say, no? She had fought against her dearest wishes ever since that evening, and she believed that she had conquered. It was a new experience to her to overcome her inclinations, to sacrifice herself for another; and she had found it very, very hard. Now, at the sound of his voice

and knowing that the real victory was not yet won, she faltered. Why was she to suffer so? What had she done to deserve it? Though she did not know it, Sylvia was going through one of those hard experiences which were to make of her a true, womanly woman.

"I suppose I am to take you in?" he said. It had usually been so: people seemed to leave them to each other.

"Mr. Styrges, will you take in Miss Heslow?" said Mrs. West coming up at that moment; "and Mr. Anthony will take Miss Pelton. Mr. Pelton, will you come with me? I want to introduce you to Miss Sartelle."

Sylvia and Styrges looked at each other, and she could not help smiling, at the risk of being observed by Anthony. It seemed so odd that they should be separated—and for Margaret Heslow, of all others. Anthony, of course, was as pleased as could be at the prospect of having Sylvia all to himself for the next hour or so. Styrges was not quite so well satisfied. He joined Margaret, however, and expressed his pleasure at seeing her again.

"*I*, too, am glad to see you, Mr. Styrges," *she* said. "I felt rather hurt for a moment *that* you passed me by with only a bow. *You* know that one naturally feels slighted at being dropped so suddenly after having been previously treated with so much consideration. I fancy you would rather be with Miss Pelton at the present moment, *n'est-ce-pas?* Well," she laughed, her eyes sparkling; "it's no use, for you must put up with my poor company during dinner. Come."

What had come over her? Was this Margaret Heslow, the grave and serious? Styrges was puzzled. Had she taken a page from Sylvia's book? He looked at her and saw her eyes laughing at him. She was enjoying his astonishment.

"You know we agreed to speak plainly," he said, when they were seated. "Well, I don't like to see you this way, Miss Heslow."

"It's just the way I feel," she said, smiling at his expression. "I want to escape from myself. Let me recommend it to you, if you ever stand in need of advice—talk non-

sense. It drives away the vapors. I thought possibly you liked such chatter as that," she could not resist saying, glancing involuntarily at Sylvia at the other end of the table.

Fortunately Styrges did not notice the glance, or his good opinion of her might have suffered. "Of course, everybody has their childish moments," he said. "It is unfortunate for us both if you, too, are in low spirits, for I certainly do not feel very gay, and we shall make a gloomy pair. I counted on you to liven me up."

"And I upon you," she rejoined. "No matter, each will find the other sympathetic."

"If I thought you were serious in what you say, I could be more in earnest too."

"Then you do not mean what you say? I am glad to know that!" she retorted. "I shall talk to my neighbor here for a while—*va-t'en, fais comme moi!*" She turned away from him.

Thus left to himself, Styrges would have been glad to remain silent. But there was a little golden-haired, baby-faced girl on his left who turned toward him with a simper and the request that he should "talk to her,

for he had utterly neglected her until now." Styrges would have been pleased to allow her to continue in her neglected state. He talked to her of the theatres and of horse-racing, and she listened. Then he listened while she told him about the friends she had in the various colleges. There was no sequence in her remarks, but she amused him and put him in a better humor.

At length she transferred her attentions to some one else, and Styrges found himself occupied solely with his plate. Stealing a glance at Margaret he saw that she, too, was engaged in no more pressing occupation at the moment than that of sipping some champagne. She looked at him and they both laughed.

"Do you feel more agreeable?" she asked him.

"I do. Why is it that you know how to manage me, Miss Heslow? I am tractable enough; but you always take me in a way I should never expect, but which still accomplishes its object."

"I hardly think it is a question of management," she replied, not knowing exactly

how to take his remark. "You did not appear to be in a proper mood to talk to me, so I thought I would leave you to yourself for a time. Oh, I must tell you! I received your mother's note, and I have induced my aunt to accept. I am so glad!"

"So am I," he said. Then he sighed involuntarily.

"One must have faith in you to believe your words after that!" she said teazingly. "What caused that sigh?—or is that too pertinent a question?"

"Yes, I will tell you, Miss Heslow—even if I lose your good opinion. You will find it a severe test of the strength of our agreement to be frank with each other."

He knew that he was about to make a grievous mistake—yes, worse than a mistake. Yet why not, on this, his last evening, his last hour of freedom, let the one woman who irresistibly drew him to her know what was in his heart? It might please him to remember it afterwards—when it was too late.

"There was once a poor artist, Miss Heslow, who determined to paint on canvas a picture which he would call 'The Future.'

He worked and toiled, day and night, to paint that which he desired the picture to express—perfect happiness. But he could not succeed. Time after time he tried to understand what perfect happiness should be like; but never having known much joy in his lifetime, he could not find the conception that he longed for. One day he was in front of his empty canvas, when a strange influence began to guide his hand. He worked on rapidly—and it was completed. There on the canvas was a woman's face, and the eyes looked at him with infinite tenderness and love, and he heard her voice say, 'I am thy perfect happiness.' And when he would have drawn nearer, an invisible yet insuperable barrier seemed to interpose between them, and he heard another voice, sad and mournful, yet one that sounded always in his ears, saying, 'That is thy happiness, but I am thy fate—I am the Past.' I am the artist, Miss Heslow," he said in a low voice, "and I have for too long forgotten the past even to hope for the future."

She did not understand him at first; but when she looked at him questioningly, she

saw in his face that he was making love to her. Another man she would have doubted, would have believed that he was amusing himself at her expense; and she had just enough of the coquette in her composition to have made her willing to carry on the game, just for the amusement of them both. But she had a different opinion of Styrges—indeed, she wanted to have a better opinion of him. In a short time she had grown to like him extremely well; so that now she really believed him. It shocked her to hear him saying this to her while she was almost certain that he belonged to Sylvia Pelton, and it disappointed her a little in her estimate of him. But it was more of a pleasant disappointment than she really knew, and she felt herself blushing as he gazed at her. She was ashamed of it, but she could not help herself.

"I think I understand you," she said with some effort, "but I should be glad to think that I have misunderstood you."

"No, I think you have understood me," he said quietly. "I do not make any excuses; I only hope that you can forgive me."

"Does not the story go on to say that the voice spoke to the artist and told him to keep on bravely and to accept the future that was inevitable, and that in so doing he would gain another happiness? I think it should," she said gently.

"He may win resignation, or even contentment; but never happiness. I do not wish to complain, Miss Heslow; but no one but myself can know how hard it is and how hard it will be for me."

"Perhaps some one does know that it is always hard to do the right, and that some one does feel sorry for you," she said without looking at him. "I will try always to make you feel that you have a very dear friend, Mr. Styrges. I never said as much as this to any man but you, and I say it to you only because I am foolish enough to believe in you. Now suppose we do not say any more on this subject," she said with with some embarrassment.

Styrges did not feel satisfied as he had expected. He had thought that it would be some comfort to him to know that she was conscious of the truth. He had expected

her to reprove him, and perhaps be a li
angry with him for telling that which he l
no right to tell, and he had been prepa
to feel content with the mere knowing t
she knew. She had, on the contrary, trea
him too kindly: it suggested one of t
things—either that she did not care her
and was simply sorry for him; or t
she did care a little. Now he pervers
wanted to know more, wanted to hear
say that she cared for him. It would
him only harm to know; but still, he fc
ishly hugged his misery to his breast a
as it were, gloried in it. He could not dr
from him the thought that if he knew tl
she loved him it might change everything

"Will you answer me one question?
you care for me at all, Margaret?"

"I think we are to leave you men to y
cigars, Mr. Styrges," she said very calm
"You see Mrs. West is rising. I shall
you at Rhinecliffe? Do thank your motl
for my aunt and myself, will you not?"

As she left he rose mechanically a
bowed. Ah! she too could be cruel! S
whom he had believed so gentle, who l

treated him so kindly! He was inclined to blame her, to be angry with her; he even accused her of being an ordinary flirt like the rest, only more clever. He smoked his cigar viciously for a few minutes and tugged at his moustache—he had made a fool of himself, he had allowed her to make him ridiculous. All the men around him were laughing and talking, and he was sure that they must have been watching him while she and he were talking, and must see his disappointment in his face.

But at length he grew calmer. He had done wrong to speak to her as he had, and she could not well do otherwise than leave him. He would not judge her, he would not think that she had tricked him, and was now laughing at him behind his back; she had not encouraged him to speak, she had been too kind, too gentle to him all along. He had been a fool to expect her to answer his last question—foolish to speak in the first place. Instead of quieting his mind, it had only made him chafe the more at the thought of what he must do sooner or later. In any event, Margaret would never——

"I want to talk to you for a minute, Malcolm," said a voice; and a hand was laid on his shoulder.

Styrges gave a start of surprise. "Oh, is it you, Jack!" he exclaimed, turning to greet Pelton. "Sit down."

"Pretty good dinner, wasn't it?" said Pelton, rubbing his hands at the recollection of some choice morsel. He was, luckily for himself, in a very affable frame of mind and in a mood to be as pleasant as possible in the discharge of what he considered a duty. "What makes you so glum?" he continued, receiving no reply save a nod of the head.

"I! I am not glum; I feel very comfortable, Jack. I am merely thoughtful."

"Will you be offended if I ask you a very delicate question, Malc?"

"Not in the least. Go ahead."

"If a man pays attention to a girl for two or three years, is seen with her on all occasions, and is apparently in love with her; if other people take notice of the amount of that attention and begin to whisper to one another that the two are engaged; if he does

all this, I say, what do you consider ought to be expected of him?"

"He should marry the girl, if she will have him," said Styrges promptly, understanding the other's thought. "Of course I know what you mean, Jack. I intend to ask her."

Pelton seized his hand. "Will you excuse me for asking, Malc? It is very indelicate, of course; but consider how much I think of my sister."

"You have every reason for acting as you have, Jack," he said, trying to smile. "I don't mind in the least—in fact, I am rather glad of it. Shan't we go out now? I am tired of this smoke."

"I'm delighted to have this over so pleasantly, Malc," said Pelton again, before they entered the parlor. "Of course, you know, I only wanted to discover if there was anything in it or no."

"Yes, that is all right," said Styrges. "Don't worry any more." He was not pleased at what Pelton had said, and he would have enjoyed nothing better than to have been free to tell him to go about his own business. The sooner done, the better,

however! and Styrges had grown used to the idea of being disposed of, *nolens volens.*

He made his way directly across the room to where Sylvia was seated talking with Mrs. West. He saw Margaret glance up at him as he passed her, but he was afraid to trust himself to talk to her any more that evening.

It should have rewarded him for any sacrifice of inclination he might be making in not stopping near Margaret to see the pleased look in Sylvia's eyes as he spoke to her. She had been very wretched during dinner, for she had come to regard Miss Heslow as a possible rival. She had but the barest of reasons for thinking so: his evident pleasure in Margaret's society, his unwillingness to talk about her as he had formerly discussed other girls, and her own intuition. What did these amount to? Yet, while she was looking across the table at them during dinner, and especially when she observed how earnestly he was speaking, she could not overcome the feeling that another was usurping her place in his thoughts—and that other was Margaret Heslow. Gerald Anthony had found her inattentive to his

remarks and had at length abandoned the attempt to entertain her; so she had gradually yielded to the influence of her own doubts and fears. But now she could have cried out with pleasure.

"Have you been enjoying yourself, Malc?" she asked rather tactlessly, seeing that Mrs. West could not but hear. "You did not look very bright during dinner."

"That is a way I have of disguising my real feelings," he said laughing. "I am always cautious about showing too much pleasure in my expression, Sylvia; it is in bad taste. So, unfortunately, I go to the other extreme and look miserable. When you see me looking as though I were happy, you may be sure that I am in a very unhappy frame of mind. I wish you would not force me to reveal my little secrets in this cold-blooded manner."

He sat down by Sylvia and joined in the conversation with their hostess. He was eager to speak with Sylvia alone, but there seemed to be no prospect of it at present. She, on the contrary, was in no haste to alter the existing arrangement. She was enjoy-

ing in anticipation the pleasure of their new and closer relations to each other; and even the presence of Mrs. West pleased her, for she kept repeating to herself, "He will ask me, he will speak to me!" She enjoyed the sensation of knowing that Mrs. West did not know. There was a peculiar pleasure in reflecting that whatever she and Malcolm might appear to be to others, she and he knew what they soon would be to each other; and the thought gave her an agreeable sensation of nervousness.

Mrs. West seemed to constitute herself Sylvia's especial *bête noire:* she remained with them or near them during the entire hour after dinner; and instead of being pleased at her presence Sylvia, growing impatient, began to wish that she would leave them. Styrges must have shared in this wish, for he seized a moment to ask Sylvia how she was to go home.

"Jack is to take me, of course."

"I will interview Jack and see if I can persuade him to allow me to enjoy that pleasure."

"Oh, will you?" she exclaimed delighted.

Styrges crossed to where Pelton was seated. "Sylvia does not feel very bright, Jack, and wants to leave. If you don't mind, I will see that she gets home all right —you know I would not drag you away."

"Oh, will you?" said Pelton. "That is good of you. All right."

Styrges was struck by the fact that both brother and sister had used the same words to express eager acceptance, and it far from pleased him. It was only another proof that he was being helped along much more than he wished. On his way back to Sylvia he passed Miss Heslow and involuntarily stopped and offered his hand.

"Good-night, Miss Heslow. You will be sure to come a week from to-day?"

"Yes, indeed. Please do not judge me too hastily or too harshly, Mr. Styrges," she added in a low tone. "I want your good opinion and your good wishes."

"I never judge, Miss Heslow," he said a little coolly. "I am past that now. *Au revoir.*"

Sylvia had already said her adieux to every one, so Styrges spoke to Mrs. West and

her daughter and then went upstairs for his coat. Sylvia came down presently and they left the house.

"Do let us walk, Malc," she said. "It is such a short distance, and I am not a bit tired."

"Sylvia," he said, when they had walked a block in silence, "will you marry me?"

It was cruel. She had been quite sure that he did not love her; now she was positive. She would almost have preferred that he should not ask her at all, rather than treat it so entirely as a matter of business. She had hoped that, even though he might perjure himself in saying it, he would tell her that he loved her and would plead for a kind answer. It made her almost indignant with him and resolved her to accept him, if only out of spite. She wished that she did not care, that she could harden her heart to every good impulse.

"You remember our conversation not very long ago?" he asked, when she did not reply. "I wanted your honest opinion then, and I believe you gave it. Well, I will act accordingly. Don't for a moment think

that it is so easy for me to say this, but—I do not really love you. Again, I do like you, I am fond of you—fond enough to do everything I can to make you happy; and I do want you to marry me. Simply because I try to be honest is not a reason that should weigh against me. Will you, Sylvia?"

"Answer me a question, Malc," she said quietly. "Is there any girl whom you would rather marry than you would me?"

"No," he said promptly enough.

"Not Miss Heslow?" she asked, looking quickly at his face.

"Miss Heslow is not, and never can be, anything to me—except a very good friend."

"Friends are sometimes dangerous," she said meaningly. "Are you sure that you would never regret marrying me and would wish that I had been some one else?—Miss Heslow, perhaps?"

She took delight in prodding him and watching him writhe. He, on the other hand, felt her words only in that it made him seem small and mean to be thus bargaining with her. He was fully resolved to win Sylvia if he could, because it was her

just due: he would not permit her to think that he was asking her in pity for her.

"Miss Heslow is nothing, absolutely nothing, to me save a friend, Sylvia," he repeated. "Do answer me without teasing me in this way."

"And you do not love me," she continued to herself. "You do not ask me if I love you. Well, I will tell you—I do love you. But do you think we could ever be happy together, Malc, under such conditions? Do you think, are you sure, that you could grow to love me in time?"

"I will try, Sylvia, because I want to try, I want to love you. And I offer you now everything but love—affection, fondness, my promise to try to make you happy in every way. These are not idle words, I mean everything I say."

"I think you could make me very happy, Malc," she said, drawing her arm more closely within his. "But you would not be happy —no, let me finish! When you really love, you will be very different from this: you will love with your whole soul, your whole mind, your whole strength, you will not

reason and argue. I know I am applying a commonplace to you; but it exactly suits the purpose in describing your nature. If you did not love, you would continually reproach yourself with the omission—for you are nothing if not honest; and that would make you feel that you were receiving all and giving nothing."

"You are mistaken, Sylvia."

He was completely mystified as to her intentions. If she loved him, why did she hesitate to accept him? If she did not love him why did not she refuse him and say no more? He did not credit her with her really good intentions, did not see that her inclinations and her sense of right were fighting to see which should determine her conduct. But, as she had said, Styrges was honest: and in the face of this opposition he took a pride in trying to win the victory for victory's sake; and her unflattering hesitation only aroused his obstinacy. Perhaps, after all, Sylvia had stumbled upon her strongest move.

"Come in, Malcolm," she said when they reached her house; "we can discuss this better inside. Now," she continued, when

she had removed her cloak, "if you have any stronger argument in your favor, you may tell me. I think you are asking me only from a sense of duty."

"Sylvia, if you loved me, you would not say a thing like that—it is almost an insult If you loved me, you would not hesitate to say yes. It would be foolish in me to argue with you, dear. All I say is, that I want you."

"I said just now that I loved you, Malc Do you know, I can't really be sure if I love you or not. One moment I am confident that I do, the next, I know that I do not—not in the way that you deserve I cannot bear the idea of giving you up and not seeing you again, as we have seen each other for so long past. At the same time, I am not confident that I could love you always as a wife should love her husband. And now, of course, things can't go on as they did before. I do not really know what to say. I think that if I were sure that you loved me, I should be able to answer in one way or the other immediately.'

"Sylvia, dear, if I loved you a thousand

times more than I do, I could not be more in earnest in asking you to be my wife. I wish I could offer you more; but"—he hesitated—"I could not offer more to any woman, even if I would. Answer me, dear."

She had just taken off her bonnet, and they were both standing by a small table in the parlor, he resting upon it with one hand and bending forward toward her. She had been looking at him intently while he spoke, but when he stopped she half closed her eyes and looked away. The warm blood rushed to her face and every nerve tingled, and her heart gave a mad throb, half of joy, half of pain. At that instant she forgot that he did not love her, forgot that this was not quite all that she had hoped for, forgot all—save that for the moment she loved him as a woman loves a man but once in her life.

"Malc, dear," she said—and she could hardly control her voice, "I think I can love enough for both." She moved close to him and, resting her hand on his shoulder, looked up into his face. "If you want me, you may have me."

He drew her to him and kissed her very tenderly. Even now she realized that he did not love her, that he might have made that first kiss seem different—somehow. It was the first sting of disappointment, and she felt it keenly. But it was her own doing; she had accepted him with her eyes open, and she must be content for the present and must hope for the future. This was not the sort of love that Gerald had offered her; and she was almost ashamed of her selfishness when she thought of his unselfishness and remembered that his love had desired, not his own, but her happiness. She had taken the step which would most probably render Malcolm dissatisfied with himself and with her for the rest of his life. He would marry her from a sense of duty—she could not drive that thought from her mind. Already she half repented that she had suffered herself to be blinded by her own love, and she longed for strength to unsay her words. Even while she was talking to him she was thinking deeply, and the thought came to her that she might be mistaken and that he might, after all, love her in time. If his

mere fondness did not change to love and if she saw that he was not contented, there would then be time for her to release him.

This cheered her marvellously. She was, in spite of her flippancy and love of admiration, a very well-meaning girl, and she would try very hard to do right when she had the right incentive. She did not stop to reflect how much more of a trial it would be to give him up later. It was a victory for a girl of her nature and temperament even to have hesitated and to have formed such a resolve; it was expecting a great deal that she should forego the few weeks of pleasure that were in her grasp. It was her first great temptation, and she deserved the encouragement of a hearty "well done!"

"Malc, there is one condition," she said at length. "I shall reserve the right to break our engagement and to set you free at any time within a year from now."

Somehow her words hurt him. Though he did not love her and did not want to marry her, he was wounded at finding that she could speak so carelessly, as he considered, of her love for him.

"What can I say, Sylvia? Of course, suppose you have the right to change yo mind. But do not, dear, get any fooli ideas into your head. I want you to mar me, and if you love me, as you say you d you will not do anything so unkind. would be childish to say anything more you will do as you please. But never thi that I mean less than I say."

"I believe you, I believe that you mean everything you say. But I, too, me what I say, dear. I am thinking of you well as of myself, and I think I know wh will be best for us both. If you love m —and she smiled faintly—"you must acce my terms."

"But think of how people will talk if y should engage yourself to me now, and th break the engagement without rhyme reason a few months from now!"

"I will take all the blame, dear," she sai "I shall give no one an excuse for sayi that it was your fault."

"That is not it, Sylvia—why should y think me capable of such a thought, hesitating from fear of what people may s

of me? It is of you they will speak, and it is of you I am thinking."

"Perhaps it may never be necessary, Malc—I pray God so! Let us not cross the bridge before we come to it. Oh, darling!" she cried, clinging to him; "can't you see that it is of you I am thinking? And why will you make it so much harder for me to do what I think is right? I have trusted you always—now won't you trust me a little and believe that I am trying to do what I think is best? You have made a different woman of me, Malc. I love you so—I may say it now, dear—that I want to be better for your sake. It is so new for me to think seriously of these things, and I need all the help I can get. Won't you help me, darling, by letting me do as I believe I ought to do?"

He was very deeply touched and he kissed her more tenderly. "It makes me feel so mean and unworthy, Sylvia, to hear you talk like this. I am giving so little—I have so little to give—and you are giving so much."

"I have given nothing as yet," she said

softly; "and you are giving me yourself—and that is not a little, but a great deal, to me."

"You have changed so, Sylvia! Even now, I don't understand you. You always were a creature of moods; but you were never in this mood before."

"I suppose it is only a mood," she said, trying to laugh. "I am so afraid it will pass away and leave me the same old frivolous, scheming girl that I have always been. I don't want it to: I want to feel that I am more like some other girl—the kind you would admire, Malc—who takes a serious view of life and of her responsibilities and gets something more out of it than just pleasure. Would you like me any more that way, Malc?"

"My dear little woman, every word you utter hurts me, because it makes me feel that you are not content with what I can offer you. Don't let us think any more of what may be, only of what is. I do admire you already, ever so much more than before—does that please you?"

She nestled her head more comfortably

on his shoulder and gave a little sigh of assent. She seemed happy, and he was glad that it was all over and settled. If he had never met Margaret Heslow, he reflected, he might have loved Sylvia. As it was, she somehow seemed more to him than he had ever believed possible, and he thought that he might almost grow to love her could he only forget Margaret. But that he was sure he could not do.

"Malc," she said, raising her head to look at him; "did you ever care for Miss Heslow? Honestly, now!"

Odd that she always returned to that one subject! He felt himself redden as she spoke. She must never know now, cost what it might.

"I met her for the first time only a few days ago, Sylvia."

"I was always afraid, dear," she said somewhat wearily, resting her head again on his shoulder, "that she would prove to be my most formidable rival. She is the sort of girl I should like to be, the kind you would admire and could love, Malc. And you really care nothing for her?"

"When I asked you to marry me, Sylvia I answered that question in a very practica way. If I can help it, dear, you shall neve have any real cause to be jealous of any one I tell you that now so that you will no worry your little head every time you se me talking to another girl. You know, Mis Heslow and her aunt are to be at Rhine cliffe next week."

"Oh, I am——" There was the sound c a key grating in the front door. "That mus be Jack, dear," she cried, springing up "Shall I tell him?"

"No," said Styrges, smiling and drawin her back to her place beside him. "Kee still and let him guess."

When Jack Pelton walked into the parlo however, and took in the situation, he di not appear greatly surprised.

"Congratulate you both," he exclaime cordially, extending a hand to each. "Sorr I am causing any annoyance, Sylvia—bu you don't mind your brother as much as yo pretend to."

"Thanks, Jack," said Malcolm, as th other turned to go. "I must be off, Sylvia.

"Oh, no, not yet, dear!" she objected. "It is still early!"

"Yes," he laughed, "but we must begin with good habits, dear, good-night and good-bye"—kissing her.

She followed him into the hall, insisted on helping him with his coat, and kissed him again and again. She had a vague presentiment that this, the happiest evening of her life, would be the only one so completely full of happiness for her. She did not speak of this, however, for she did not care to mar her joy by a single breath of care; so she watched Styrges leave with a smile on her lips and love in her heart.

As Styrges walked home he felt much better satisfied with himself than he could have believed possible an hour earlier. He had done his duty; and hard as that had been, it had brought its own reward. He was almost contented, he felt prompted to do the most philanthropic acts, he had a feeling of kindness and charity towards all about him.

It was this feeling that prompted him to stop and extend his hand to Craik Orcutt,

who had nearly run against him in turning a corner. Orcutt looked surprised—in fact, he was surprised, and he hesitated to take the proffered hand as though Styrges had some ulterior and treacherous motive in thus treating him better than he deserved. Styrges noticed his hesitation.

"Well, aren't you going to shake hands?"

"Oh, of course!"—nervously. "You know, Styrges, old man, I suppose you had some provocation for being angry with me the other day. I am very sorry it happened so."

"That is all right, Orcutt," said Styrges—he would do nothing by halves. "You may congratulate me, by the way—I am engaged."

"What! N—not to Miss Heslow!"

"No,"—coldly; "to Miss Pelton."

Orcutt drew a deep breath. "I am so glad, my dear fellow," he exclaimed, his face actually beaming; "so glad. You are very fortunate."

"Yes, indeed," said Styrges, trying to make his voice sound hearty and cheerful. "Glad you are pleased. Good-night! Oh, Orcutt!"—as that person was turning the

corner; "shall we see you in the country next week?"

"Yes, thank you, Malcolm. I'll be delighted to come, now that we have no quarrel."

"Never mind about that," said Styrges. "That is all ended. Good-night."

"No need to make enemies," he thought to himself later. "I am glad I spoke to Orcutt."

He knocked at his mother's door as he went upstairs, and when she came out he told her what had taken place that evening. If Orcutt's face had beamed, Mrs. Styrges' countenance grew radiant as she listened.

"You dear boy! I knew you would! I shall see Sylvia the first thing in the morning. Are not you happy, Malcolm?"

"Oh, yes! In fact, mother, what else should a man in my position be but happy? That seems a useless question. I am glad you approve. Good-night."

Styrges was glad to reach his room that night. It had been a trying evening for him and he was worn out, physically as well as mentally.

"My announcement this evening
to please every one," he said to h
"mother, Orcutt, Pelton, Sylvia of c
but it does not please me so well. I
if it will be agreeable news to Mar
And then he resolved to think no mc

CHAPTER VI.

SYLVIA herself excepted, the one individual who rejoiced most at the news of Styrges' engagement was Craik Orcutt. Just as Sylvia had feared Miss Heslow's influence over Styrges, so Orcutt had watched with jealous eye any signs of preference for Styrges that Margaret might betray. But now the greatest obstacle in the way of his winning Margaret for himself seemed providentially to have been removed, and he felt that any danger that in the future might threaten from that quarter could easily be guarded against.

He was in high spirits when, a few evenings later, he called on Margaret. To begin with, there was now a clear field for him; then, as though fate had not been generous enough, there was the visit to the country which would throw him constantly in Mar-

garet's society. Besides this, he did Margaret the injustice to believe that if she had cared for Styrges at all, she would be glad to accept himself out of pique. He purposed to aggravate this feeling of resentment by judicious allusions to the engagement; so, during a pause in the conversation, he began smiling to himself as though at an amusing thought, then laughed aloud.

"It always amuses me to think what an uncertain quantity Mr. Styrges is," he said, watching her closely.

"I don't understand you at all," she said indifferently. "Has he done anything peculiar?"

Was it possible that she had not heard? Orcutt believed that she had not, so he gladly proceeded to enlighten her.

"No, nothing peculiar, in one sense of the word. But in another light, yes. He has, after long years of waiting, announced his engagement to Miss Pelton."

"Oh! not really?" Margaret could not help a little gasp, she hardly knew why. Orcutt observed it with satisfaction. "I am very glad to hear it," she remarked, regain-

ing her self-possession. "He has chosen a very charming girl."

"Yes, indeed," he said, stroking his forehead. "But the amusing part of it, I fancy, is that in spite of his attentions to Miss Pelton, one could never feel safe in saying that it would be she. He is a great favorite —I don't know a man I like better" (magnanimously)—"and there were plenty of girls to whom he paid attention and who would have been only too glad to get him. You could never tell anything about Malcolm, he fooled everybody. I venture to say that Miss Pelton was as much surprised as any one—she will have to keep an eye on him even now."

"You are rather hard on him," she said, laughing quite naturally.

"Not at all—at least, I do not mean to be," he objected. "Oh, no! I am one of Styrges's best friends as far as really good wishes go. But one is, of course, amused at seeing several pretty girls kept guessing as to which of them is to be the lucky one."

"That would be a remarkably funny sit-

uation," she remarked calmly; "but hardly so funny, I think, for the poor girls. According to you, there are several disappointed people—who are they?"

"Oh, I don't pretend to know Malcolm's affairs quite so definitely as that," he said lightly. He perceived quite clearly that, whatever she might feel, she would allow him to see nothing.

But he did not know how hard it really was for Margaret. She was able to command herself while he was present; but when he had left, she rushed upstairs to her room and gave free rein to her thoughts. Had she been deceived in Styrges from the first? Was Orcutt correct in saying that Styrges had been equally attentive to several girls? She acknowledged to herself that she loved him. Why? She did not know why, only that it was so. And yet, could she love a man who perjured himself?—who could say to her, "I love you," and then think to himself a moment later, "That was quite well done?" The odd part was that she had never felt inclined to doubt him; she had believed he was truthful and sincere,

and when he had spoken to her so earnestly and passionately she had seemed to read only truth and honesty in his face. Then she had felt only a great pity for him—now she pitied herself.

She knew that now it was hopeless for her to love him, that she had not properly valued that one chance that he had given her. It would be well for her if she could convince herself of his unworthiness, for then she might be better able to conquer this foolish love of which she felt she had some reason to be ashamed. She wished only to know if Orcutt had told the truth. Why should he try to deceive her? He was, according to his own statement, one of Styrges' best friends, and he probably really thought it a good joke. She feared that what Orcutt had told her was only too true. Her reason prompted her to forget Styrges, if she could, or to think of him only as one to be remembered with contempt; her love told her to wait and not to judge him unheard.

It was quite as cruel a blow to Gerald Anthony to hear that Sylvia was irrevocably lost to him. He had been like the man

under the pendulum, in Poe's story of the Inquisition; although he saw no hope, he had hoped against hope. But now the blow had fallen and he found that he could bear it much better. He was too honest a lover to bear any malice against Sylvia or Styrges, and he accepted his fate with almost a sign of relief that it was finally settled.

He hesitated for several days before he could summon courage to tell Sylvia that he wished her joy. But one day he was near the house; and feeling that it must be done, and the sooner the better, he rang the bell. He was thankful to find that Styrges was in the parlor with Sylvia, for it made it much easier to say all that was necessary and then served as an excuse for leaving promptly. Anthony may have been deceived, but he fancied that Styrges looked anything but displeased at his appearance—which was certainly not in accord with the character of successful lover.

In a moment or two Anthony gained confidence to offer them both his congratulations, which Styrges received with a hearty "Thanks, Gerald, old man," and Sylvia with

a pretty blush. Then, as no one appeared anxious to pursue that branch of the subject, Anthony ventured to ask what day was set for the wedding.

"I want it immediately," said Styrges; "but Sylvia insists upon a long engagement. You don't know how unkind she can be when she wishes."

"I never have been in favor of hurrying these matters," she broke in. "You see, one can never tell what may happen in a year to make one change one's mind. Oh, I am only joking," she explained, seeing Anthony's look of astonishment. "Really and truly, I do believe in long engagements—one is so much happier afterwards."

"If I were Malcolm I should have some thing to say about that," said Anthony generously.

Then, strangely enough, as it seemed to Gerald, the subject was again dropped. It was really a relief to him, though he was puzzled to account for it. He wondered if Sylvia, understanding his feelings, was careful not to give him pain by referring frequently to her happiness. Styrges had as

much as told him that he did not l
Sylvia; why, then, had Styrges been
hyper-sensitive in asking her to marry hi
He must care for her now; so it could
be that he avoided the subject because
was distasteful to him. And yet, it look
so. And they did not act as though th
had quarrelled! Anthony remained a
loss to account satisfactorily for their c
duct. Even though Malcolm had not
merly loved Sylvia, he should have chan
by this time, surely!

Conversation was very desultory. Ger
felt uncomfortably out of it; Sylvia
absent-minded and hurt that Gerald sho
see that Malcolm was not more attentive
her, and Styrges, though unembarrassed
natural, was far from animated. He
accepted his position, and now, man-like,
did as he knew he was expected to d
called on his fiancée, talked, made him
endurable, kissed on provocation—and
that he was fulfilling all the requireme
that could be expected of him. Anth
rose to go, and rather to his surprise Styr
rose also.

"I'll walk a bit with you, Gerald," he called after Anthony, as the latter was leaving the room. "Good-bye, dear," to Sylvia. He kissed her, and then joined Gerald in the hall. Sylvia wondered why he did not linger for just one little moment, for the usual "last word." She had hoped to detain him, that they might whisper together for a time, keeping Anthony standing outside; then, walking to the door with Malcolm, she would apologize for keeping him, and he would explain to Anthony with a smile, "So many things to talk about, old man. You understand." Anthony probably would not understand; but he would depart pondering upon Sylvia and Malcolm and their mutual devotion.

She was already beginning to wonder seriously if she would not have done better to refuse Malcolm. He gave her all she had a right to expect, but she found that she valued that at little without his love. And so it happened that Malcolm Styrges left behind him a very unhappy girl. But even she could not say that it was his fault.

* * * * *

The day for Mrs. Styrges' house-part was no exception to the general run of day —it arrived in due time. Mrs. Styrges ha sent up the servants a week in advance an had herself gone up the day before th guests were expected. So that on the afte noon of this particular day, as she sat i front of the bright wood-fire in the librar she could please herself with the thoug that nothing she could do to insure the con fort of her guests had been left undone, an that only the direct intermeddling of the ev powers would interrupt the even develo ment of her plans.

From where she sat she could see a broa smooth lawn sloping gently down the hi until it was swallowed up in a belt of tree Beyond that one could see only tree-to for a quarter of a mile, and then the rive At intervals there came a dull roaring, ro ing sound, a line of white smoke rose abo the trees—then the noise died away, th smoke disappeared, and all was once mo still. This passing of the trains, and an o casional boat on the river, were the onl visible signs of the busy world outside; f

the nearest neighbors were nearly half a mile away, and the village was distant more than two miles. Across the river were the grand outlines of the Catskills, with Rondout nestling at the river's edge.

It was nearly time for some one to arrive, and Mrs. Styrges was growing impatient. She rose to take a last look through the rooms. A wide hall ran directly through the centre of the house. On the left, as one entered the front door, was the parlor, which ran from front to rear and really embraced half of the ground floor. On the right was the library where she had been sitting, and next to this was the dining-room. For the sake of gaining plenty of room the kitchen and servants' quarters were in a wing built out from this corner of the house. In this wing there was also a billiard-room, opening on the piazza.

Mrs. Styrges found all things arranged to her satisfaction; and just as she was returning to the library she heard the rumbling which foretold the approach of a train. She watched the line of smoke spread out as the train shot by, she could just catch a glimpse

through the bare trees of a swiftly-moving brown object, and soon she heard the engine whistle as it slowed up at the station. She picked up a hat and a warm wrap and went out on the piazza.

The air was bright and clear, but quite soft and balmy for so early in the year, and she found it very pleasant to walk up and down in the sunlight. The trees were innocent of leaves, there were a few cakes of ice floating down the river, there were patches of snow here and there on the mountains; but still, spring was in the air, in the sunlight. Perhaps it would not be far from the truth to say that the joy of spring was in her heart, for one of her fondest hopes—to see her son engaged to Sylvia—had been realized, and she looked to these days in the country to bring them still nearer together.

She had not long to wait; for soon two carriages emerged from the trees at the opposite side of the lawn, and following the drive around its edge drew up before the house. Orcutt and Gerald Anthony were in the first, and in the second were the Peltons and Malcolm. Mrs. Styrges was so

pleased to see them that for the moment she forgot that the party was not complete. Malcolm, not seeing Mrs. Rand and Margaret on the train with the rest, supposed they had already arrived, and as soon as he decently could hastened into the parlor to see them. Not finding any one there, he turned and met his mother at the door as she was coming in with the rest.

"Has not Miss Heslow come?" he asked rather nervously;—"and Mrs. Rand?" he added.

Sylvia noticed his anxiety, though his mother did not.

"How thoughtless of me!" the latter exclaimed. "I forgot for the moment that our party is still incomplete. No, of course they haven't!"

"Missed the train, I suppose," volunteered Orcutt. He, too, was interested in the welfare of one of them.

"What a shame!" Sylvia managed to say half-heartedly. She wished there were no more trains for a week. "They say the only occasion on which a woman is prompt is when she is going to take a journey. I

know one girl who wanted to be on time for a train and got to the station so early that she took the train before—which, by the way, was an express and did not stop at her station."

"Yes, I know who that is," said Jack Pelton, winking at the others. "I believe if Sylvia had tickets for a Saturday night performance at the theatre she would be there in time to attend the matinée."

"When is the next train up, mother?" asked Malcolm, who had been paying no attention to the conversation.

"There is a time-table in the library," she said. "Oh, of course they can get a train in time to be here for dinner. Let me show you all your rooms. Are you tired? It is a very tedious trip, but very pretty. Will you come up, dear?" to Sylvia.

Malcolm had gone to look for the time-table and was rummaging about in the library when Sylvia, who had contrived to wait in the hall until the rest had gone upstairs, came to the door and looked in. He glanced up at her, and then continued his search.

"Can't you find it, dear?" she asked.

Then, coming close to him, "I wonder if you would make the same amount of fuss were it I who was missing?"

"A great deal more," he said without looking up. "It is so annoying! I should have seen if they were on our train before we started and should have waited over a train for them. Ah, here we are! They should reach here at a quarter after seven—not so very bad."

Sylvia, ever suspicious, always, for some undefined reason, on her guard against Margaret, had been in an agony ever since they arrived. She made the mistake of allowing him to see it.

"I can't imagine, Malc," she said with almost a sob, "why you are so excited about Miss Heslow. You seem to forget that such a person as I exists—you have not even kissed me!" He turned to her with a strained expression about the mouth as though he were trying to keep from saying something unpleasant, and she realized her mistake. "No, dear! I didn't mean that! Try to forget I said it. I am only tired out and ill-tempered."

"Never mind, dear," he said quickly, putting his arm about her. "It was my fault. I am put out over this because I am very hungry and was afraid we should be compelled to wait dinner. Truly, that's it"—as she looked at him doubtfully. "Now run upstairs and don't think any more about it, or I shall feel like a brute."

She smiled and walked toward the door, and he went out into the hall with her. But when she had reached the head of the stairs he turned and went back into the library and threw himself down at full length on the lounge. He could not disguise from himself that Sylvia was occasionally tiresome. Those signs of her love, which he would have so eagerly sought for in another, were nothing more than constant reminders that he was irrevocably bound to her. Had he but known the efforts she made almost every hour to suppress this very emotion, he would have blamed himself more severely. His sense of justice seemed to be growing weaker, more blunted; and he, who had begun with the promise and determination never to be otherwise than kind and patient,

was already galled by the feeling that this was expected of him.

As he lay there gazing up at the ceiling, his ill-humor changed to a pity for Sylvia, and more than for her, pity for himself. For he seemed to see Margaret's face, and it looked down at him with the same expression—half surprised, half sorrowful, and yet with an undertone of tenderness—that it had worn when he had foolishly told her that he loved her. Then, as he fancied, her expression changed and she gazed at him contemptuously, reproachfully; and yet, there was another emotion which struggled to show itself and against which she seemed to be fighting. He half-raised his arms, then let them fall again and closed his eyes. Here was the secret of his troubles. It was no revelation, for he had known it before. But the fact of its impressing him so strongly showed him once again how hopeless it was for him to hope to care much, if anything, for Sylvia while Margaret occupied so much of his thoughts. It might almost be that she possessed some extraordinary power over him, for he could not keep her from

his mind, though he might forget her for a time. He had not thought much about her during the last few days; but now the mere mention of her name was sufficient to drive all other thoughts, all good resolutions, far from him. Not that he had any intention of being untrue to his promises, of breaking his faith; and his mind seemed to have lost its power of thinking for itself, his power of volition seemed dead. He knew that it was madness for him to invite Margaret to the country, that it would be insanity for him to see her and talk with her daily. And, though his reason told him this, he was powerless to stir a finger to prevent it. Well, it would soon be over!

At this moment he heard two sounds—some one descending the stairs, and the noise of wheels coming up the drive. He sprang up and rushed out to the door, where he met Orcutt. Together they went out on the veranda. A village hack was just stopping in front of the door, and in it were Mrs. Rand and Margaret. Both the men rushed down to open the door; though Orcutt had the grace not to usurp the place of host and

allowed Styrges to go first. Styrges helped Mrs. Rand out.

"Oh! Mr. Styrges! Such a mistake—so stupid! We were so busy talking that we were carried by to the next station. You may know how nice it is to look out from the train and to say to yourself, 'there is my station! I wonder when I shall reach it!" Providentially, there was a train coming back immediately, so we devoutly returned thanks and jumped aboard."

"We were all very much worried about you. So you were on the same train as ourselves and we never saw you. I went through all the cars."

"Yes, but we were late and just barely caught it."

Owing to Mrs. Rand's effusiveness, it had fallen to Orcutt to assist Margaret to alight. She had been giving him her version of the story, in substance the same; but now she turned to Styrges and offered him her hand. Mrs. Rand now seemed to see Orcutt for the first time.

"I am so very glad you came, Miss Heslow," he said eagerly. "The party

would have been so incomplete without you."

"Then I too am glad we came," she laughed. "Oh, I must not forget! I want to congratulate you most sincerely upon your engagement to Miss Pelton. I am sure you must both be very happy."

He looked at her intently, but she was apparently indifferent to the effect of her words and smiled at him brightly.

"Thank you. I can answer for one of us being very happy."

She seemed hardly to hear him, for she was already halfway up the steps. Just then his mother came to the door.

"You must introduce us, don't forget!" said Margaret lightly. "Mr. Orcutt, don't you want to run down to the station and see where our boxes have paused to rest? I am afraid we never can manage to dress for dinner to-night! How do you do, Mrs. Styrges? I hardly know any appropriate words with which to thank you for inviting us here."

Styrges went up to dress in a very dissatisfied frame of mind. Margaret had talked

to Orcutt as much as she could without being rude to the rest. She had shown not the slightest feeling either one way or the other. He had hoped that she would be either unnaturally indifferent to him, even to coolness, or that she would be quiet and reproachful. But she had been simply natural. He wondered if Orcutt was anything to her. Somehow, he would be almost glad to see her engaged to some man, so long as it was not Orcutt; that would complete the barrier between them. But Orcutt? Never! —any one else.

Margaret's feelings, as she went to her room, were very much less complex in character. She was simply unhappy. Since a certain bit of news had come to her she had not wished to visit at Rhinecliffe; but she very well understood that there was no help for it, it was too late to decline. She had made up her mind to one thing, which was to be her first principle; that Malcolm must learn from her absolutely nothing of her feelings toward him. She was too high-minded a girl long to feel any resentment for the way in which he had deceived her,

but she was disappointed in him—whic was almost the same thing. She had hardl any right to blame him for her misfortur in loving him, for it had all happened s quickly that she was disposed to bear th blame of it herself. She told herself th could she know that he had not intentio ally deceived her, that he had not delibe ately lied in telling her he loved her, sh could be almost happy. It was the thougl that she had given her love to a man wh was unworthy of it that was galling to he But this question she could never ask, an the truth she would probably never kno

It was near the dinner-hour, so she wei down to the parlor. As she reached th door she perceived Craik Orcutt standir before a cabinet containing ivory carving He was examining them closely, his fa thrust against the glass. He did not he her enter, and she stood for some momen watching him. For the first time in the acquaintance she felt a definite and positiv emotion towards him, and that was one repulsion. She could not well explain i but he moved his head from one side to th

other so quietly, as though he did not wish any one to hear him or to know what he was about, that it gave her the impression that he was sly. She would have preferred to see him boldly open the door of the cabinet and take out one article after another and examine them. Involuntarily she shuddered and was about to turn to go elsewhere, when he heard her and turned around with a start. Why should he be startled, she wondered.

"Ah! Margaret, I am so glad to see you," he said, smiling broadly. There was something in the smile, too, that Margaret did not like: she would have been better pleased to see him frown. He took her hand, still smiling, and bowed low over it. She half drew it away, for it flashed across her mind that he might be about to kiss her. Then she, too, smiled at the thought. "I was hoping you would come soon. Not having you to look at, I was looking at some other pretty things to pass the time."

"That is the failing of you men, always to want something pretty to look at," she said a trifle impatiently. "You are never constant to one, but you must wander about

in search of others. And besides, Mr. Orcutt, I do wish you would not refer to me as 'pretty thing.' I am not pretty, and I do lay claim to some personality of my own."

"No," he said, with his habitual gesture and looking at her out of the corners of his eyes; "you are really not pretty—you are beautiful, to me."

"How vulgarly commonplace!" she exclaimed half angrily.

"I can only answer you with two quotations," he said unmoved. "In the first place, 'the true way to avoid vulgarity is to think for oneself,' I thought for myself. Secondly, 'the commonplace is never common.'"

"Then it must be your way of saying it," she exclaimed. "Oh, no! that was rude! I didn't mean it that way," she added quickly. "I am so ashamed of myself!"

For a wonder, Orcutt's sensibility was touched. Usually the most self-sufficient and the most self-satisfied person one could find, he felt the snub when it came from the lips of the woman for whose good opinion

he cared most. He flushed red, but in an instant recovered himself.

"Of course, you know, you can say anything you please to me," he answered, "and there is not the slightest fear but that I will forgive you. We were only joking, after all. But I think you should be punished this time," he said as an after-thought. "You must surely be disciplined. Will you let me name the punishment?"

"Oh, yes—anything."

"To-morrow morning, if it is clear, I shall contrive to get a rig from Malcolm or from somewhere in the village, and I want you to come with me for a drive."

"Would that be exactly right?"

"Why not? We are the oldest and the best of friends!"

Just then Styrges and Sylvia came in. They had undoubtedly heard Orcutt's last remark, and the knowledge of this influenced Margaret in her reply.

"That is so," she said to Orcutt. "Well, ask Mr. Styrges, and I will abide by his decision." But she looked at Orcutt.

"What is that?" asked Styrges.

"I asked Miss Heslow to take a drive to-morrow morning," Orcutt explained somewhat triumphantly, "and risked the assertion that you would be able to put me in the way of finding some sort of a trap. Now it is submitted to you to decide if it is perfectly proper that she should go. Is that a fair and impartial statement, Margaret?"

Styrges glanced at her, and she returned the look and nodded.

"I have no right to object," he said laughing; "and if I had, I see no objections to your amusing yourselves, since that's what you are here for. As to the trap, we have one in the stable and it is at your service." He was glad that he was able to speak indifferently, though Orcutt's plan was just what he had dreaded. He noticed, too, that Sylvia involuntarily gave his arm a little squeeze, as much as to say that his words pleased her.

Margaret was not over pleased at the turn things had taken. She had wanted Styrges to object and to throw some obstacle in the way of their going—and she was not particularly anxious to drive with Orcutt, anyway.

But it would never do to back out now, and she chid herself for thinking anything further about it.

The others had by this time assembled and dinner was announced. Sylvia, Anthony, and Winifred Pelton were on Styrges' right, while on his left was Mrs. Rand. Margaret was seated between Jack Pelton and Orcutt. She talked across Orcutt to Mrs. Styrges for a time, and then turned to Jack Pelton, who was telling some really very amusing anecdotes. Orcutt made several attempts to break into the conversation; but she was apparently deeply interested in what Pelton was saying and would not give her attention to any one else for any length of time. So Orcutt was fain to be content with talking to Mrs Styrges and Winifred. Styrges devoted himself to Mrs. Rand, whom he found to be a very quaint and entertaining old person; so Sylvia was left to Anthony. Gerald was the only really satisfied person at the table: he was between two women whom he knew well and liked, one the woman he loved, the other his best friend. His firmness and decision of character had

already asserted itself, and having reso
that hereafter Sylvia was to be only a fri
he wasted no time in retrospection anc
gret but set himself to grow accustome
the new order of things. He suffered,
he did not permit himself to suffer n
lessly.

Sometimes in their conversation
Rand had appealed to Margaret, and Sty
had tried to interest her and keep he
tention. But she would not be dive
and he was obliged to be content with
ple answers to his questions. She did
do this in a way which made it eviden
the rest that she was desirous of not tal
to him; but he could not fail to notice
for some reason she was determined nc
allow herself to be drawn into anythin
sembling a *tête-à-tête*. This hurt him,
yet it pleased him: he did not want he
misunderstand him; and still, he was
to find that she cared enough to show
displeasure even in this way. He reso
that she should talk to him before the e
ing was over.

"Who is it, Mr. Styrges, who says, '

shall always be the most curious thing in the world to men?'" remarked Mrs. Rand. "I have been watching you for one full minute, and I confess I do not understand the first thing about you. Apparently you should be one of the happiest men on earth—no ills, bodily or mental, a bright future, and engaged to a charming girl whom you love and who, of course, loves you! And yet, you seem to be unhappy: you are absent-minded, you frown at times, and *enfin*, I do not understand you!"

"Truly, Mrs. Rand, I am very happy indeed. I suppose some unpleasant thought crossed my mind—this champagne is not sufficiently cooled, for example."

"Malcolm," called Orcutt, who being momentarily unoccupied, had caught the drift of the conversation; "*à propos* of your being a happy man, allow me to propose as a toast the health of Miss Pelton and yourself—a sort of public congratulation, don't you know."

Styrges was a bit annoyed at the interruption, especially as coming from Orcutt, but acknowledged the compliment.

"I do not entire agree with you, Mrs Rand," he said, resuming the subject. "I is a part of our life's creed to believe tha woman is more incomprehensible than man and therefore more curious."

"Oh, pshaw! no," cut in Jack Pelton who was growing talkative. "One meet loads of women one can understand, if only one sees enough of them. I leave it t Craik."

"What do you mean when you say yo understand a woman, Mr. Styrges?" aske Mrs. Rand.

"I suppose I mean that familiarity witl a certain woman's nature and character whicl enables me, knowing an action, to deduc her reasons for performing said action; o given her opinions on a certain subject, t foretell her actions."

"Then your definition is a refutation o Pelton's statement," answered Orcutt. "Fo if one thing in this world is true, it is tha woman is never consistent."

"Oh, leave out all those old saws, an look at it from your own point of view! exclaimed Pelton. "That was said by som

man who was disappointed in love, and I think woman has ever since taken it as a compliment to her sex and tried to live up to it so far as she dares."

"And it is a compliment," said Mrs. Rand warmly. "It takes as much courage to be inconsistent as it does to be the opposite!

"Are we wandering from the point?" asked Styrges smiling.

"Take the original proposition—men are the most curious to other men and women: can you place your finger on one man whom you thoroughly understand?"

"Yes—if I could reach Gerald Anthony," laughed Styrges.

"But can he say the same of you? Can you, Mr. Anthony? Do you understand Mr. Styrges as well as he understands you?"

"N—no," said Gerald reflectively; "I don't understand him in the least."

"There! You see? Margaret, we have not heard a word from you. What is your opinion or your experience of understanding men? I am sure you will agree with me,

that they are just as difficult to understand as we poor women."

"Only that a man is always the first to make a woman understand him," said Orcutt, *sotto voce*. Only Mrs. Styrges heard him, and she smiled quietly.

Every one was listening for her answer, and Margaret felt herself blushing. She was tempted to shirk the question; and yet she did have an opinion and one which she had been trying to convey silently.

"I think there is but one essential key to the understanding of a man's character," she began;" and that is, to discover if a man is honest or dishonest, if he is to be trusted or despised. It may take a woman some time to find this out; she may even think that she has found it and then find she has been deceived. But when she does know this, she knows the man. As a subject for study and speculation, a man is interesting only so long as she is in doubt—then she begins to like him, or else she despises him."

"A very logical answer!" cried Pelton. "By George, though, it's hard on some poor fellow! Who was he, Miss Heslow?"

"I did not say there was any one," she said sweetly.

"No; but only experience of both classes of men could have taught you that. What do you say now, Malc? That helps your side of the argument, doesn't it?"

Although she had not looked at him, Styrges felt that Margaret had meant her words for him, and at first they hurt like a lash. Then he again felt almost glad to know that she cared enough about him to tell him her scorn. Perhaps, however, it was best that she should despise him, for then he would be obliged to avoid her and the temptation to think of her as a remote, a very remote, possibility would not be always in his way. Still, she should change her opinion of him some day."

"Do not you think that women are inclined to judge somewhat too hastily, Miss Heslow? I know I am arguing against myself, but I do not wish to take an unfair advantage."

"They may, Mr. Styrges," she laughed. "But sometimes, you know, it really does not matter whether they misjudge a man or

not, because it is not every man one cares to take the trouble to comprehend."

Styrges winced, but fortunately no one was watching him. She certainly could be cruel! Still, he had compelled her to listen and to answer him, and he had expected all along to be misjudged. He was about to speak to her again; but she had turned to Orcutt and was rallying him upon his attentions to a mutual fair friend. Mrs. Rand had forgotten their discussion, for she was upholding to Pelton the delights of Bar Harbor in June. So he turned to Sylvia and found her quite ready to listen, for Anthony had neglected her for at least a half minute.

"Sylvia," he said in a low tone, "I wish you would marry me very soon."

"How odd!" she remarked, flushing with pleasure. "This is the first time to-night you have spoken to me, and then you say the very last thing I should expect to hear."

"I had to talk to others, you know—What else would you have me do? Will you marry me next month?"

"Oh, I never could, Malc! I could never

in the wide world get ready so soon." She was again fighting the temptation to take him at his word, because she loved him so. But not for nothing had she once before won the battle: knowing that it was only just to him to wait, she found it much easier this time to do what she believed was right. "I told you, dear, that you must wait, and I mean it. It is just as hard for me—much harder—as for you. Don't think it isn't! But I am sure you will thank me some day for not being very selfish." Then, as the ladies rose to leave the table, "You have made me so much happier, Malc, by asking me. Don't stay too long!"

The men sat over their coffee and cigars a long time, Pelton and Orcutt being engaged in a lively argument as to the amount a man should spend on his clothes. These two were ever ready to argue about anything, however trivial, and always carried on their discussion in such a loud tone of voice —especially Orcutt—that there was no necessity or opportunity for any of the others to express any opinion. Anthony was listening with a half-disgusted, half amused ex-

pression, while Styrges had wearily closed his eyes and was far away with his own thoughts. At length the butler came in and confidentially whispered to Styrges that "if the gentlemen had finished their coffee, Mrs Styrges would allow them to smoke in the billiard-room."

Styrges cut Orcutt short in the middle of a brilliant tirade against his tailor, and they joined the ladies in the billiard-room. A game was made up, Sylvia and Malcolm playing against Anthony and Winifred Pelton. Orcutt established himself next to Margaret, while Pelton, who had arrived at the boresome stage, talked to the two older ladies.

In the intervals between the play Styrges spoke once or twice to Margaret, and she, of course, replied to his questions and comments. But he soon saw that she had changed toward him and did not care to talk to him, so he abandoned the attempt to interest her, especially as Orcutt seemed to derive pleasure from his lack of success. As for Margaret she may have made a mistake in allowing Styrges to see that she took the

matter so seriously; she may have overdone her part. It was, however, not in accord with her honest nature to act otherwise than as she felt; if she liked a man, she must show it; if she was disappointed in him, she must show that, too.

CHAPTER VII.

STYRGES was down very early the next morning, for his thoughts had kept him awake most of the night. So at five o'clock he could endure it no longer but dressed and went downstairs. The sun was hardly yet up; but it was a crisp, clear day and it refreshed him. He went out to the stables, and loosing his favorite dog started for a walk.

Why had he ever met Margaret Heslow?—or rather, why had not he met her before it was forbidden him to love her? And having met her, what madness had seized him to tell her he loved her? Why could not he have foreseen that it would only make it more difficult for him to do his duty? And why—as if that were not enough!—had he been so rash as to invite her to Rhinecliffe? Usually strong enough to do that which he knew to be his duty, he seemed to have no

independence of will where she was concerned: he was continually yielding to temptations which formerly he would have considered it an easy matter to resist. Was there a fatality in their meeting and in all that followed from it? He did not believe in fatality—and yet, what else could account for his weakness of will-power? Of course, he loved her better than any woman he had ever known, better than he could express to himself in words, better than his honor, as it would seem. But even that seemed hardly to explain his actions.

He had been kept awake by the thought that now she whom he loved misjudged and despised him. Would not she despise him tenfold did she but know his thoughts, his weakness and lack of honor? Why not let well-enough alone? If he could but keep silent she would continue to believe that he had purposely deceived her, and then gradually she would avoid him more and more and he would find it forced upon him to keep out of her way. Then, when he had forgotten her, he might learn to love Sylvia.

But he did not believe that he ever could

forget her. There was just one existent st of affairs which promised to be perpetu he loved Margaret and he did not l Sylvia, he wanted to marry the one a must marry the other; and there seemed be no likelihood of any change which wo make it easier for him.

Then, as though to show him how ab lutely powerless he had become, he reali that he could never be content to let M garet continue to misjudge him. He kn that, should he see her alone at that m ment, no power, no consideration on ea would prevent him from telling her ag that he loved her. And if she despised h now, what a just contempt would she f for him then!

His train of thought had carried him the village, where he bought the pap and when he started back it began all o again. At least, he thought, it could do harm to tell her that she was unjust in c sidering him a flirt, and so much as that would tell her. She probably would not lieve him. But he assuredly had no ri to tell her any more, and he would be c

tent with having spoken the words. He had tried to gain a few moments alone with her the evening before, but she had managed to avoid him without making it apparent to any one else that she was doing so purposely. Once, when for a minute they were comparatively alone in one corner of the billiard-room and he had been on the point of telling her, she had called to Anthony to ask him some trivial question and he had crossed the room and made a third in their conversation. But such bad luck could not last forever. The remembrance of Anthony's stupidity made him slam the door as he entered the house.

He threw off his hat and coat and turned to the library. At the moment he entered it Margaret was just coming out into the hall. She had on her hat and jacket and was just drawing off her gloves.

"Good-morning, Mr. Styrges," she said pleasantly, shaking hands. "I did not expect to see any one so early, so I came downstairs and have been out for a walk. Isn't it cold? I must go upstairs and prepare for breakfast."

His surprise kept him silent for a moment. But now as she was turning to the stairs he touched her on the arm.

"Won't you please come back to the library for a moment, Miss Heslow? I want to talk to you—no, really, I won't make you late for breakfast."

"I am sure you will have plenty of chances to talk to me later, Mr. Styrges," she said. She had stopped at the staircase and was drawing her gloves through her hand. "Won't you have patience until the breakfast-table?"

"No!" he exclaimed. "You will not give me another chance. I have no reason to expect it, but I ask you to give me a few minutes as a favor."

"Why!" she laughed, "I can do no less than be obliging to my host, can I?"

"Oh, no!" he said earnestly. "Don't put it in that way! Say you will come as a kindness to me."

"Why, if it will be a kindness—of course."

They went back to the library. He stood leaning against the mantel, while she sat in front of the fire and looked up at him, half

curiously, half smiling. He did not speak immediately, and she grew impatient.

"Well?" she asked.

"You cannot but have a very poor opinion of me, Miss Heslow," he said in a low voice, "after what I said to you not very long ago and what has happened since then. Why mince matters! I told you I loved you, and a week later became engaged to another girl. I meant you should understand that I was in honor bound elsewhere. Did you know?"

Her expression had grown a trifle hard, but she kept her eyes fixed on his face.

"No, I did not understand," she said.

"I know I should not have spoken to you as I did," he went on. "I hardly know what madness entered into me and made me speak. I should have suffered anything rather than have told you and, in fact, I think I should have suffered much less by keeping silent. No matter about that—it is too late now, and, so far as you are concerned, it is all over. But I do want to set myself right in your estimation, if I can. You think that I, besides being false to Miss Pelton,

am also a liar; that I told you I loved you and did not mean it. It is true that when I told you so I did love you."

"How can a woman have faith in a man who acts as you have acted?" she asked calmly. But she had ceased to look at him and was looking at the fire. "If you loved me, you would have felt that it was dishonorable to tell me so. It is not even so unfair to Miss Pelton, for you were not yet engaged to her. But suppose that I had cared anything for you, don't you see how unfair it would have been to me? Men in your position, honorable men, do not tell women their love, though——"

"I—hope—think, I have always been the sort of man you would call honorable. But with you, Margaret, I could not help myself—you are not like other women, God knows."

"Please, Mr. Styrges, do not call me Margaret. Besides, I have heard since that you made love to a great many girls."

"From whom? No, never mind, don't tell me. It was not so."

"So, you see, I could have but one

opinion," she said smiling; "and that was not very flattering to you."

"Will you try to believe me now, Miss Heslow? You have only my unsupported word—will you try to trust me until you know more surely that I am unworthy?"

She rose and walked slowly toward the door, and he followed her. There was a change in her now, for she had lost her gayety, her indifference of manner; her head was bowed slightly and she appeared to be going through a mental struggle. Outside the door she stopped and turned to him with a trace of her former resentment.

"I will try to believe that at the time you spoke you meant all you told me," she said slowly.

"Thank you," he said earnestly. "And you will be more kind to me?"

She gave him her hand. "Yes, we are to be very good friends. Now I truly must run upstairs! *Au revoir.*"

She had hardly gone halfway up when Sylvia appeared at the head. Styrges had gone back to the library.

"Why, good-morning, Miss Heslow!" she

said offering her hand. "What early birds you and Mr. Orcutt must be."

"Is Mr. Orcutt down yet?" asked Margaret unconsciously.

"Ah! that will not do. I heard you talking to him just now in the hall."

"Why, no," said Margaret, beginning to understand her meaning. "That was Mr. Styrges. He is in the library now. It is so lovely outside that I have been out for a walk. I shall be down for breakfast right away."

Sylvia went down to the library and found Malcolm, who had heard her coming, absorbed in reading the morning paper.

"Good-morning," he said, kissing her.

"How long have you been down, dear?" she asked. "Why didn't you knock at my door, and I would have gotten up to keep you company?"

"I came downstairs at five o'clock and have been up to the village."

"Was Miss Heslow with you?" She could have bitten out her tongue the instant she had spoken.

"No, I met Miss Heslow here a few minutes before you came in."

"I heard you talking and thought it was Mr. Orcutt."

"He is not down yet, I imagine."

But Styrges was mistaken—Orcutt was down. He had descended the stairs very quietly just at the moment Styrges and Margaret returned to the library. Hearing voices, he had used extra caution not to make a sound. For a moment he had listened and had overheard just enough of their conversation to understand that there had at one time been something more than friendship between them. Then he took his hat and escaped to the veranda by the rear door, because he did not wholly like the rôle of spy. But the instant he reached the piazza he was sorry he had not remained to hear the rest, and he was tempted to turn back. After standing irresolute for some moments he mastered the impulse and began to walk up and down the piazza.

He had previously felt conscious that his most dangerous rival with Margaret was Styrges. Had not he more reason now than ever before to fear the latter's influence? Oh, why had not he remained to listen!

Styrges had been pleading with Margaret for something—Orcutt could not quite make out what—and she had listened to him. Probably by this time they had made up their quarrel, whatever it was, and Styrges would hereafter be on a better footing than ever. Could it be that Styrges purposed breaking his faith with Sylvia and would try for Margaret? No, hardly; Styrges was too honorable for that, and even Orcutt did not think him capable of it. It did not matter, however, what his intentions were; his influence was what Orcutt had to fear. And just at this time, too, when Orcutt had been congratulating himself that Margaret was beginning to avoid Styrges, here Styrges must meddle again and have an explanation with her which would undo all Orcutt's work—oh! it was too bad!

Well, there was one comfort! Styrges himself had put into Orcutt's hand a weapon which might prove very potent. What would Sylvia say had she been in his place this morning? But Sylvia, Orcutt told himself with a self-satisfied air, would have so far forgotten herself as to remain and

listen. Thank heaven, his conscience was free! He was but the instrument of justice, and he owed it to Sylvia and to himself to use skillfully the knowledge chance had revealed to him.

The more he reflected, the more cheerful the view he took of it—and, incidentally, the more satisfied with his conduct did he become. He returned quietly to the house by the rear door and walked boldly through the hall to the library, where he found all assembled. He was by this time in such good spirits that when he entered the room he forgot to be nervous and to smooth his forehead.

"How happy you look, Mr. Orcutt," remarked Mrs. Styrges. "We were about to go in to breakfast without you. What has happened?

"I had good news this morning," he answered.

"Have stocks gone up?" asked Anthony smiling.

Orcutt pretended not to hear the question and just then breakfast was announced.

During the meal Orcutt could not but re-

mark a great change in Margaret's manne towards Styrges, for she was always ready t talk to him. He forthwith decided that h certainly owed it to the community, as rep resented by Sylvia and himself, to tak matters into his own hands and direct thei course as well as he might be able. So afte breakfast, instead of lingering to read th papers and smoke, he sought out Sylvia an casually suggested a walk outside. Sh seemed surprised; but having no reason fo refusing, she readily acquiesced. Orcut wasted no time once they were out of hea ing of the others.

"Don't you consider it the part of friend, Miss Pelton, to give a warning, eve though it be unpleasant to tell and t hear?"

She looked at him amusedly. It did no occur to her that he could be referring t herself.

"What in the world do you mean? Yes I have always heard so."

"Will you promise faithfully to kee secret all that I tell you?"

"Certainly," she said, still laughing. "Yo

know how good my sex is at that. Never tell, so help me," she cried, trying to look serious.

"This is no joke—honestly," he said, "Promise me in earnest."

"I do," she said, still smiling.

"Very well." He began to grow nervous in spite of himself. "If I were in your place," he said slowly, "I should be very glad when I was safely married to Malcolm."

"Of course I shall be glad—most people are," she said lightly. "I do not understand the necessity of that remark."

They had been walking slowly up and down the gravel in front of the house. Now she stopped and leant against the railing at the foot of the steps.

"Well, it is just this way: I have reasons for thinking that there was once something between Malcolm and Miss Heslow—something of a tender nature, I mean." He stopped and looked at her. She had grown serious and was looking at him rather sternly, but he could not divine her thoughts. "I think, too, that he still likes her pretty well," he went on more boldly. "Now, you

can never tell what may happen within a few months. I know he is very fond of you now; but he may be fonder of her after a while—if you wait too long."

"What reason have you for thinking so?" she asked. She still wore the same expression, but she spoke quite calmly.

"I overheard enough of a conversation between them this morning to feel sure of what I state," he said confidently. "They were talking together in the library quite early this morning when I came downstairs."

"And you listened?" she asked in the same tone.

"Oh, no." But I could not help overhearing something of what they said."

"Then don't you think," she said, looking at him almost sweetly, "that you would have helped me better by interrupting their *tête-à-tête?*"

"It may be. But, you know, I did not wish to meddle."

She smiled a little to herself. "Then what is your advice, Mr. Orcutt?"

"My advice is to ask Malc to marry you

as soon as is convenient. I am sure he will be only too glad."

"Do you really think he will? And don't you think it would be well for me to be around early in the morning, so that I can overhear them in case they should have any more meetings?" she asked excitedly. "And then, you know, I might surprise them!"

"No, I do not think that would do any good," he said reflectively. He was delighted to find that she fell in with his wishes so readily. "I have told you this only because I like you and wished to act the part of a friend. You are not displeased, Miss Pelton, are you? What do you say?"

"I say," she said quietly, gazing steadily into his eyes until he was forced to look away; "I say that you ought to be taken out to the stable and horsewhipped. Not even the fact of your being Malcolm's guest should protect you, you sneak! You are safe from me, because you tricked me into promising to keep to myself all you might say. But if you ever dare to speak to me except when it is necessary, or if you ever

come near me when I am alone, I tell you promise or no promise, I will see that some one gives you your deserts." She half raised her hand as though to strike him, and he involuntarily drew back. Then she laughed a little mocking laugh, that stung him more than her words had done, and walked slowly up the steps, humming a tune. At the top she paused and deliberately turning around gazed for a moment at the view. Then she entered the house.

Orcutt was for a moment too astounded and too fearful of her to move. He stood where she had left him, looking alternately at the ground and at the door through which she had disappeared, and occasionally smoothing his forehead with his hand. Then it occurred to him that he must not stand there, or some one would remark it and ask what the matter was. He mechanically drew out a cigar and lit it and forgot to throw away the match, so that it burnt his fingers. This roused him, and his feelings at length found vent in three words—"You damn fool!"

Though one hearing him might have sup-

posed that the match was the immediate cause of his calling himself by a bad name, the match was in reality far from Orcutt's mind. He began to see that he had fatally overreached himself, that he had been tricked —or rather, that he had deceived himself. He had held an entirely different opinion of Sylvia's character. Once upon a time—not so very long ago at that—she would have accepted gladly such advice and help as he had offered. Why should he have imagined that she would scorn it now? He could not understand her at all. And she had called him names! Well, the best intentioned people are often misunderstood. It was not the names that he minded so much, for he did not see how they applied to him—and he really deserved great credit for not stopping to listen that morning! No, it was the shame of being tricked and led on by a woman—nothing more and nothing less. He should have approached Jack Pelton first and let that obliging person settle it with Sylvia.

He had been walking slowly down the road, and now, having reached the border of trees, he turned back. Although he would

not acknowledge it to himself, he was ashamed to meet Sylvia again; it would be so awkward! After all, he mused, he had lost very little by the morning's work. Sylvia was, or pretended to be, very angry, and would not speak to him. Well, he had never had much to say to her, anyway; so that was of little importance. To be sure, she held suspended over his innocent head the threat to tell Malcolm; but it rested with himself whether she actually told or not. Sylvia knew now; and the poison would work, whether she wished it or not—at least, she would be more careful not to leave Styrges and Margaret together. No, matters might be much worse; and if he, at the cost of facing an angry woman for a half minute, had helped to build up a barrier between Styrges and Margaret, he might flatter himself with his success. At all events, he had the drive with the latter to look forward to—it was nearly time for them to start now.

Orcutt did not evince any great amount of sagacity in prophesying that Sylvia would remember and ponder over his words. She had understood Orcutt better than he had

supposed; she divined that he was anxious to see Styrges out of the way so that he could have Margaret for himself. She was inclined to pity Margaret. Not that there had hitherto been any love lost between them; and, for her own sake, Sylvia would have been as pleased to see Margaret out of the way as Orcutt would to be rid of Styrges. But, after her experience of Orcutt's character, Sylvia would have pitied a worse enemy than Margaret were it the fate of that enemy to fall into Orcutt's hands.

She could not conceal from herself that Orcutt's hints had frightened her. She would have died sooner than let him see that she attached any importance to his information; but when she reached her room she was thoroughly miserable. That Malcolm and Miss Heslow had been together in the library that same morning she already knew, and she had also remarked that Margaret had treated him more pleasantly at breakfast. Her own impression, too, had all along been that he was more deeply interested in Margaret than in herself—now she could hardly doubt it any longer.

Though she did not yet fully realize it, she began to understand how kind and noble all along Malcolm had been to her, since it was Margaret whom he loved.

For the first time since their engagement the impulse came to her to set him free, to sacrifice herself for him. It was a very faint and ill-defined thought, and she shrank from it almost before it had shaped itself in her mind. No! she could not give him up now! She loved him so dearly—in fact, she would love him so devotedly that he could not but be happy! Oh, surely she deserved him all for her own! No one could ask or expect her to give him up now, could they? Sylvia tried to think no more about this possibility, for she feared lest from constantly thinking of it the impulse should master her, even against her own will.

Just then Winifred came in and read in Sylvia's face that she was in trouble.

"Has something gone wrong, dear?" she asked, seating herself on the arm of Sylvia's chair and putting an arm about her. "Will you tell me what it is?" as Sylvia nodded to her first question.

"I am afraid I ought to release Malcolm. He doesn't love me."

"Has he been acting badly?" Winifred asked, ready to take up arms to defend her.

"No! of course he hasn't! When I think that it may be true, I wonder how he can be so good to me."

"But I don't understand, Sylvia."

Sylvia told her of her fear that Malcolm was in love with Miss Heslow, suppressing Orcutt's share in her enlightenment. "He told me, when he asked me to marry him, that he did not love me but was only fond of me, and I knew very well what I was doing when I accepted him. I am sure his meeting Miss Heslow this morning was accidental! I'm sure he is not deceitful, even if he does love her! Oh, Winifred, he is trying to be so good to me, and I am trying to keep him when he really doesn't belong to me! I didn't use to care about other people's feelings—only my own happiness and pleasure; and now I am being paid back. What shall I do, Win! what shall I do!"

She flung her arms about Winifred's neck and began to cry. It was all such a surprise

to Winifred that for a few moments she said nothing, but only drew Sylvia closer and kissed her and stroked her hair until tears gave place to an occasional sob.

"Suppose I tell you something that no one else knows, dear," she said at length. "Jack does not really love me; he is only fond of me. Now suppose I were to feel jealous and make myself miserable every time I saw him talking to another woman—how could we ever get along together? It often makes me very unhappy, but I never say anything; and when Jack comes back to me, I try to be just the same as ever, and he appreciates it. He is very fond of me. One cannot always look for mad affection, one must be reasonable. It is the fond, true, cheerful women who make men love them—not that I am one of them! I fall very, very far short of what I ought to be. But it makes me happier to know that I am trying all the time."

"Yes, you are one of them, dear," cried Sylvia, kissing her, "and we all love you so for it. But what am I to do? Malc is not my husband!"

"No; but he will be, sweetheart, and he will be a good husband. And you will be the dearest wife!—if you keep on as you have begun. Just wait, dear; don't have an exaggerated conception of your duty; only try to be bright and loving towards him from day to day. And never let him see that you are jealous, Sylvia! Come and tell me, if you like to, dear; but don't let a man get the impression that you do not trust him. It will be a little hard at first; but you will succeed in being patient, and then you will be happy. Now don't forget my lecture, dear, but just be as happy as you can."

Sylvia kissed her again and again; then jumping up and following a woman's natural impulse, she set herself to drive the redness from her eyes.

Although her mind was not yet free from doubt, she felt much happier; and knowing that Winifred's advice was good, so far as she could apply it to her own case, she resolved to follow it as well as she was able. She would try to restrain her petulance when Malcolm appeared to neglect her; she would not try to keep him near her when she saw

that he was not contented to be there; and —yes! she would even try to be nice to Miss Heslow. If only she could succeed, then Malcolm would admire her the more for it.

She went downstairs with Winifred. The latter was to drive to the village with Mrs. Styrges and Mrs. Rand, who were waiting in the hall. Sylvia went out to the steps with them.

"Do you care to come with us, Sylvia?" called Mrs. Styrges, as they were about to start. "There is plenty of room. Only I thought you and Malcolm might have found some plan for this morning."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Styrges. I think I should rather stay here."

"Well," she laughed, "I suppose it is not right for the three chaperones to take an airing all at the same time! But it's too late now. I leave the house in your charge. Good-bye!"

Sylvia went into the library and found it deserted. Orcutt and Margaret had started for their drive, and Malcolm had disappeared soon after breakfast. She picked up a book

and settled herself in front of the fire. She read a couple of pages and found it stupid, so she tossed it aside and began to wonder what she should do with herself. She heard some one descend the stairs and then Styrges came into the room.

"Hello, little girl!" he said, leaning down to kiss her. "Care to take a walk to the river? I want to see if the ice has hurt the boat-house."

He seemed in good spirits this morning and talked gayly all the way down to the shore. Sylvia wondered if it was his *tête-à-tête* with Margaret that made him so light-hearted, and she wanted to ask him. She tried instead to meet him halfway: to laugh and joke when he laughed, to keep silent when he seemed not to wish to talk; and she found that she was having a much better time than usual. He, too, noticed it, for he stopped abruptly in the middle of the road and kissed her again and told her that she "was very nice to-day."

When Styrges had satisfied himself that the boat-house was in no immediate danger from floating ice, they started back home.

They walked slowly, and of his own accord he drew her arm through his.

"Sylvia, I have asked you before and I ask you again—do say that you will marry me soon."

"Why won't you wait, dear?" she asked smiling.

"Because—because I think we shall both be happier when we are settled. I can never quite forgive myself for taking so much and giving so little."

"Hush! Malc, you give quite enough."

"But it puts you in such a peculiar position. It looks as though I did not want to marry you."

"What does it matter how it looks, so long as we know better? Is that the only reason?"

"Well, dear, to be frank, there are other reasons which I can't tell you, because they would worry you. They really do not concern you at all, Sylvia; so don't think any more about it. The chief reason," he said earnestly, "is that I want to and know that it is best. Won't you do this for me?"

"Perhaps I have been wrong all through,

Malc," she said musingly. "I suppose it would be more right of me to yield to your wishes, since you really mean what you say. Very well, I will agree to this much, if you will wait for a month, then I will marry you as soon after that as you may wish. But you must not tell any one or say any more about it during the next four weeks. Does that suit you?"

He pressed her hand. "Yes, dear, I am very glad."

"Every one seems to have deserted us this morning," she remarked. "Where is that brother of mine?"

"He said he had some letters to write and would stay up in his room. I hope the people are making merry. Mother and the dowagers are driving, Orcutt and Miss Heslow are driving—by the way, I hope Orcutt will be careful of that mare and not drive her too fast. She has a tender hoof."

Could Malcolm have seen Orcutt and the mare at that moment, he would have been worried very little on the score of fast driving. He would have been annoyed for other reasons, however.

On leaving the house, Orcutt had followed a road leading to the south along the river. He was lively and talkative, Margaret was quiet. At first he was too well satisfied with the sound of his own voice to remark the fact that she was unresponsive, and he worked himself up to quite a pitch of enthusiasm over a novel he had recently read. He was, as usual, nervous at the thought of what he intended to say and talked to keep up his courage. But after an interval of silence the conviction forced itself upon his mind that he was interesting only to himself. He shuddered as does a man who is about to take a plunge into cold water, and then decided finally that he would chance it. He held the horse down to a walk and mechanically stroked his forehead. How should he begin? Better take her by surprise.

He assuredly did take her by surprise. She was looking straight ahead of her, absorbed in her own thoughts, when she felt her hand seized and carried to a pair of very moist lips which immediately went through the process of imprinting a kiss thereon.

"Mr. Orcutt!" She was too astonished and angry for a moment to say anything more but looked at him as at some curiosity. Then it seemed to strike her as amusing, for she began to laugh. "Is that a new game, Mr. Orcutt? Because, if it is, I do not like it. Don't do it again. Isn't this a splendid view?"

He had a dim impression that his little scheme had fallen very flat. But his blood was up and resolute lines appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"It is said by some one, Margaret, that in a *tête-à-tête* a woman is silent with the man she loves. You have been silent—I should be glad to think, Margaret, that it was because you care a little for me." He said this with a rising inflection which made it equivalent to a question. Margaret looked annoyed, but said nothing. "I love you very much, Margaret, and I want you to be my wife. I'll try to make you happy, you shall have everything you can desire—I have money enough. Will you, my love?"

Somehow, that apostrophe, "my love," coming from Orcutt and spoken in a loud

voice sounded so grotesque that Margaret went into shrieks of laughter. She hardly knew what she was laughing at—but it was so funny!

Orcutt grew red and uncomfortable. "It is not a joke! Why can't you take me seriously?"

"Because, Mr. Orcutt, though you have proposed marriage to me, I have not made you any promises and so have a perfect right to take your words as I please. They impress me as funny."

He saw that he must humor her. "It is my way of saying them, I suppose. And yet other men have said those same words to other women and have not been laughed at."

"But, you know, it is so funny coming from you, because—will you forgive my frankness?—you seem always so interested in yourself to the exclusion of everybody else, that I should never have dreamt that you cared enough about any woman to ask her to marry you."

"Do be serious, Margaret! It is no laughing matter to me."

"Give me time to think, then."

At first the thought of marrying Orcutt had seemed preposterous to her. She had never in her wildest dreams thought of loving him, and she knew that she never could love him; and the possibility of marrying without love had never occurred to her. For some time she still smiled to herself at the thought. If Orcutt only knew that she loved Styrges, he would see how impossible it was for her to think of any other man. And yet—oh! why did the thought ever come to her!—and yet, here was a way out of all her difficulties. Ugh! she could not think of it! But, yes, she would think of it. She understood now that Malcolm was going to marry Sylvia to satisfy his sense of honor, and, judging by herself, she knew how hard must be the struggle. Could not she make it easier for him if she engaged herself to Orcutt, and thus took from Styrges the last vestige of hope of ever winning her? She knew what hope meant: for did not she herself, even now, until Styrges was actually married, hope in the face of all possibility that something—she did not know what—would intervene and give him to her! And

now she actually meditated cutting this last shred of hope that was all she had to comfort her! And at what a cost—a loveless marriage! It seemed to her that it would be a sin for her to give herself deliberately to a man whom she could never love. Any suffering, any self-denial that would help Malcolm she was ready to endure, anxious to make; but even with a right object in view, she could never excuse herself for committing what she considered a sin.

"Well?" said Orcutt. He had very patiently kept silent; but he had been watching her face, and he had read in her expression very little that was encouraging to his hopes.

"Oh, no! I can't, Mr. Orcutt. Love for you has always been the remotest thought from my mind. I always liked you very well as a friend, and I hope I always shall—but I could not possibly marry you."

"Won't you try to care for me, Margaret?"

"Oh, I never could. You know, Mr. Orcutt, love is not a cultivated plant, it cannot be grown under glass at will—it just happens. Now it has never happened to me to care

for you, and it never will, I can assure you. Had not we better turn back?"

Orcutt silently acquiesced in her suggestion, and they started for home. His face wore a sullen expression, but he was not yet shaken off.

"Do you care for any one else, Margaret?" he asked abruptly.

In spite of her effort to control herself, she grew confused, and he noticed it.

"You can have no possible excuse for asking that question," she said quite coolly. "You evidently need instruction in the rudiments of courtesy toward women. Supposing it were true, only one man has the right to ask that question—the man I love. You have your answer, and now, so far as my affairs are concerned, you have no right to meddle. Why won't you be sensible and see that you are only hurting yourself by persisting?"

"Because I love you, Margaret. "I know," he said excitedly, "why it is you are so indifferent—you love Malcolm Styrges! Yes, I was coming downstairs this morning and I heard just a word or two of your con-

versation with him. Then I went back upstairs, so that I could not hear more. I didn't mean to hear, and I should never have said anything about it if you had not exasperated me. But I mean to marry you, Margaret! I will—Oh, no—! Margaret, forgive me! I forgot myself!" For she was regarding him coldly with a dangerous look in her eyes. It brought him to his senses and made him realize how foolish and how useless it was to threaten her.

"I am sorry you have appeared to such disadvantage this morning, Mr. Orcutt," she said quietly. "I don't see why I can be expected to forgive you for speaking to me in that way; but I will try to forget, on condition that hereafter you will be more careful."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE more he thought about it, the more did Craik Orcutt grow certain of the truth of Margaret's words—he had "appeared to great disadvantage." After this decided rebuff he had been unusually quiet until they arrived home. Then, as he helped her from the trap, he had said quite gently that "he knew the fault was his, but he hoped she would try to forgive him. That he had not given up all hope and never would, until he should see her married to another man." She had tried to convince him that his hopes had no foundation and would receive no encouragement from her; but he had simply asked her not to say any more about the matter for the present. He had calculated well the effect of his words, for she left him with a feeling that he must love her very much, since he could be now so unwontedly patient and kind. As a result of

this, she even had a much better opinion o him than ever before and almost forgot an rudeness of which he had been guilty. Sh even had an ill-defined feeling that, shoul it become necessary, she could at any tim reverse her decision and accept him.

Orcutt had found need of great self-com mand to restrain his vexation while with her And then it became necessary for him to b agreeable at lunch! This was even mor difficult, owing to his being seated next t Margaret and being obliged to talk to he from time to time. She acted toward hin as though nothing had happened; but h was irritated to see that she was more read than ever to join in a conversation wit Styrges.

When lunch was over Orcutt slipped awa to his room and locked himself in. He hac the sense to see that he would make a grea mistake in remaining with the others whil he was so bad-tempered, and he wanted t have it out with himself once and for all He had abundance of cause to blame him self: first, he had antagonized Sylvia wit very little gain to himself; then, he had for

gotten himself with Margaret so far as to let her guess at his plans. She did not seem to be much impressed by his chance words, but he knew they would recur to her the moment he gave her any cause to suspect him of underhand work. Not that he himself considered it underhand to use any weapon in order to win her, for he placed especial faith in the truth of the old saying concerning the fairness of all methods in love and war. Only—his "all" was spelt with large capitals and was infinitely comprehensive.

He had scarcely felt at all confident that Margaret cared for him, nor yet had he looked for absolute indifference. He had not expected a favorable answer to his questions, nor had he greatly cared to receive it then. But what he had desired and expected was her promise to think favorably of his suit—the rest he would have been content to leave to time and to his own perseverance. Could it be that he had been too abrupt in proposing? He did not know. He had never before made love to a girl, he had never seen any one else do it, except on the stage ; and he was not passionately fond

of books of the sentimental order. His knowledge of this branch of a man's education was purely theoretical: he had not planned beforehand how he should approach the subject with Margaret, he had simply yielded to impulse. Perhaps this impulse had revealed more of his nature than could be discovered by an hour's conversation with him: it was thoroughly selfish, self-assertive and self-confident, and showed a bargaining spirit—as though Margaret were but an article which he desired to acquire. He had kissed her hand partly because it was there and suggested the act, partly because he had already assumed the right to do so; and partly because he believed that it would produce a favorable impression upon her mind. But passion—that is, the passion that does not reason but is in itself a sufficient reason—this was unknown to him. For some men to kiss Margaret's hand as Orcutt had done would have been an insult, a profanation; from others it would have been a prayer to God to bless her; but from Orcutt it meant to Margaret no more than the act of a child who sees a spool and conveys it to its

mouth. She had known by intuition just how little feeling there was in the act.

But Orcutt, of course, did not know this. He had been very well satisfied with his manner of proposing ; it was only for what had followed that he had considered himself to blame. No, he laid the blame in another quarter : it was Margaret herself who was deficient in appreciation, and the cause of it was Styrges. It was not himself, but to a slight extent Margaret, and to a great extent, Styrges, whom he should blame for his disappointment. He had all along suspected that Margaret liked Styrges, and he had done all he well could to discourage her in her fancy ; but he had not been certain of his suspicions until that morning, nor had he realized, until she refused him point-blank, how far matters had gone from his control.

So far as Orcutt could judge, matters stood in this way : Margaret was in love with Styrges, and he was by no means indifferent to her ; but, as he was engaged to Sylvia, Orcutt felt sure that he would not be untrue to her for the sake of Margaret or any one

else. One thing, however, he was quite sure of: that so long as Margaret cared for Styrges, he, Orcutt, stood no chance with her. Now who could tell what might happen in the next few months? Besides, Orcutt was not willing to waste any time: he could wait, if necessary; but he must feel sure that there was something at the end of his waiting. It might be that Margaret would find some one else whom she loved, and then his opportunity would be gone. He must try to win Margaret in spite of and because of her love for Styrges: he must do as girls so often have done to men—he must catch her on the rebound. If only he could create some misunderstanding between Margaret and Styrges, his chances would be tenfold better.

There were, he thought, two ways of doing this: he might make Margaret treat Styrges coolly, or vice-versa. No, the former would not do, for he had tried that. He had said things about and against Styrges sufficient to arouse the anger of any woman—and what was the result? An explanation! after which matters were worse

than before. The very fact that Styrges was anxious to offer an explanation and Margaret was willing to receive it was enough to frighten Orcutt. No, the possibilities with Margaret were exhausted; for he really did not dare to say anything worse against Styrges than he had already said.

But Margaret herself! That was a different matter. Could not he so influence Styrges that the latter would avoid Margaret and thus offend her, so that she would turn to himself? He was wary of approaching Malcolm, for he had received one illustration of the folly of interfering in that gentleman's affairs. Still, the fact was evident that this was the only likely means of making sure of Margaret; and, cautious as he was, he would run a great many risks to win her. After that, the deluge:—he did not care. He would seize the first opportunity of accomplishing this plan.

Fortune was to favor him far sooner than he expected. He was in a much more agreeable frame of mind and was tired of sitting in his room, so he opened the door to go downstairs. As he took a step into the hall

he heard voices from the next room, t door of which was ajar. At first he cou distinguish nothing that was said, for th spoke in a low tone. Then he heard M Styrges exclaim, "Poor girl! Doesn't s know anything about her father?"

"No, not a thing," he heard Mrs. Ra reply. "I knew she would worry and bro over it, so I have never told her. I a sorry now that I did not, for she is bound hear of it some day."

Just then, to his disgust, the door again which Orcutt was leaning gave a great crea He began to move about busily, arrangi the articles on his bureau. But he cou hear some one in the next room get up ar close the door, so all his opportunity f overhearing more was gone.

He had changed his mind about goir downstairs immediately. He closed his do and sat down to think. There was no doul that Mrs. Rand's pronoun of the third pe son had referred to Margaret. What did all mean? Orcutt had a good memory f matters in which it did not concern him t meddle, and he remembered immediatel

certain rumors he had heard concerning Margaret's father, as also one or two remarks she herself had let fall and which proved Mrs. Rand correct in saying that "Margaret did not know." Now, what was it that Margaret did not know and which she "was bound to hear some day?" If Margaret would be likely to worry and brood over it, "it" must be something concerning her father which it was desirable should not be publicly known. . . . Had not Heaven put an instrument into his hand? Was not this the clue he sought? and could not he, by following this clue, discover something that would compromise Margaret and would help to alienate Styrges? His face grew smiling as he thought of what he might accomplish with a little knowledge.

He must try to recollect all that he had ever heard concerning Heslow. It was simply nothing. Margaret had said once that there was a mystery connected with her father's death, and Phœnix Atwood had declined to discuss Heslow—that was all. And yet, some one must know, and he must unearth that some one and acquire the knowl-

edge for his own use. It should not be so difficult, after all. There must be plenty of people who had known Heslow in business, and these once found, the rest would be easy.

At last, he thought, he saw the way clear. He would discover all he could directly he returned to town—no, by the powers that be! why not go now? There was nothing to prevent, and he was not having a particularly good time; besides that, he wanted to know as soon as possible how important to the success of his plans the information would prove to be. He looked at his watch and saw that it was hardly yet four o'clock. He could easily catch the train to town before six o'clock, and with luck he could find out all he needed to know in time to return the next evening.

He wasted no time; but putting a few necessaries into a dress-suit case, he hurried downstairs. There he found Styrges, Sylvia, and Gerald Anthony.

"Hallo, Orcutt! What's up now? What are you doing with that?" asked Styrges, pointing to the case.

"I am obliged to go to town over night, Malc. I had a telegram this morning, but I said nothing about it for fear of disturbing you. May I come back to-morrow?"

"If you do not, we shall all be very much offended," said Styrges heartily. He never did things by halves—if he could help it; and having invited Orcutt, he felt bound to try to like him. "Must you really go now? Can't you put it off? Well, I suppose the best I can do, then, is to send you down to the station for the five o'clock train. Is it business?"

"Yes. One of my investments has gotten into a tangle, and I must be on hand myself to straighten it out. As long as I am coming back so soon, perhaps you will explain to your mother? I do not want to trouble her to say *au revoir* for just one day. Do you think I can catch that train?"

"The trap has just come back and I don't believe they have unharnessed it yet. I'll telephone out to the stable for them to send it around."

It was certainly very embarrassing for Orcutt to be left standing there with Sylvia

and Anthony, and he grew very nervous and began to stroke his forehead. He tried to sustain a conversation with Gerald. But presently Sylvia, who had not spoken, turned and went to the piano. Anthony looked as though he would like to follow her; but he was too polite and remained talking with Orcutt. At this moment Styrges and the trap arrived simultaneously.

Orcutt hesitated a moment, but Sylvia helped him out of his difficulty. "Good-bye, Mr. Orcutt," she said coolly; then she went on with her playing.

"*Au revoir*, Miss Pelton," he said in a relieved tone. "This business is so unfortunate, Malc," he said, as he was getting into the wagon. "I expect to get back to-morrow, however."

"Yes, you surely must, Orcutt," said Styrges. "Good-bye."

Orcutt arrived at the station a trifle ahead of time, so he occupied the minutes by sending a telegram to "Philip Ryan, Private Detective; No. —, Sixth Avenue, New York." The immediate result of this was that on alighting from the train some three

hours later he was met by a short, thickset man, with black eyes, a heavy black moustache, and heavy puffed cheeks. The two were evidently old friends, for the detective saluted Orcutt with the exclamation, "Well, Guv'nor?"

"How is business, Ryan? Making much nowadays?"

"Well, no. Yer see, Guv'nor, the cops is mostly new hands an' they don't stand in with us same as they used. They're afraid they'll get nabbed doin' it."

"I have something easy I want done, Ryan, and I want it done quickly. Come over to the hotel and I'll explain all you need to know. It's just this," Orcutt began later, when they were seated in the café. "About twenty years ago there lived in the city here a man named Frederick Heslow. He was very well known in a business way. Now I want you to find out all you possibly can about that man, and especially how and where he died. Do you understand? I should make a guess that you can find out a good deal from the police. Can you do it?"

"I'll bet I can, if there's anythin' to b found out. I suppose—the usual terms?"

"If you find out all I want by to-morro at four, I will double the usual amount. want a report in writing—everythin And Ryan—don't be afraid to pay for an thing you want to know. I can't afford t save money in this. Only don't you try t cheat me. You know that won't go."

"Right, Mr. Orcutt! Is it anythin' lik that Bella affair I looked up for you?" h asked with a grin.

"Shut up, Ryan," exclaimed Orcut angrily. "I pay, you attend to your pa of it. Good-night—oh! by the way, see m at the Marlborough at four to-morrow."

Glad to have this business off his mind fo the present, Orcutt took a cab and wa driven to the club, where he indulged in hearty meal. A number of his acquaintanc spoke to him, and he was careful to explai that it was important business that ha brought him down from Rhinecliffe. Aft dinner, being left to himself, he stopped i at a theatre for an hour and then returne to the club to sleep. He was greatly i

clined to lie awake and plan out what use he would make of the information he was to receive on the morrow. But not knowing what that information would prove to be, he resisted the temptation to speculate and slept soundly all night.

He rose late the next morning, had breakfast in his room, read the paper; and then, feeling restless, he dressed and went out. Never had he spent so long and tedious a day. He wondered what they were doing at Rhinecliffe: if Styrges was with Sylvia or with Margaret.

Of late, the more he thought of Styrges, the more he hated him, in a sneaking, treacherous way. If he had not been so much afraid of Styrges, he would have liked to do him some harm besides keeping from him the woman he loved. He did not altogether like this meddling in dangerous matters, anyway: he was naturally too cautious and timid. He made up his mind that this Heslow affair was to be the last in which he would take so many chances.

He was waiting impatiently at the Marlborough a full hour before the appointed

time. But four o'clock came at last, and with it came Ryan. He handed Orcutt a closely written sheet of foolscap.

"Did you find out anything?" asked Orcutt as he took it.

"Everythin'," said Ryan chuckling. "It was dead easy work. It's all there."

Orcutt was already halfway down the page. He was smoothing his forehead, and as he read his expression changed from one of slight surprise to positive delight. But as he read further his face lost its pleased look and his brow contracted into a frown; and when he had finished he threw the paper down angrily.

"Damn," he exclaimed, so loudly that the clerk at the desk and two or three bell-boys looked around at him. "It's no good at all."

"I'm very sorry, Guv'nor," remarked Ryan, who had been watching him all the time. "You wanted it worse, didn't you?"

"Never mind what I wanted," said Orcutt angrily. "How did you find this out?"

"Went to police headquarters and got 'em to look back. I'll tell you, they didn't

want ter tell me a bit! It was ter be kept secret—they was paid to keep it quiet. But I just let the feller see that there was money in it fer him, so he let me cop the whole shootin'-match. Here's your bill."

"A great deal to pay for something I don't want," said Orcutt, who had calmed down a bit. "Now you know enough, Ryan, to keep this business to yourself, don't you? Very well, here's your money."

"Thanks, Guv'nor. If you have any more little errands fer me ter do, just let me know. Here's yer paper," picking it up. "I don't think yer struck on letting it lie round on the floor. Good-day, sir."

Orcutt took the paper mechanically and sat in silence for some minutes after Ryan had left. He was once more disappointed in his expectations, and this last plan in which he had placed such confidence of success had proved to be worthless. He was, to be sure, possessed of a great deal of information concerning Heslow: but what good would it do him? He could not use it. But wait! What should prevent his using a part of it and thus accomplishing the

same result? It was only a chance, and was risky—but why should he hesitate t run even greater risks than this would be?

His apathy suddenly disappeared, and h drew out his watch and glanced hurriedly a it. Then he consulted a time-table. Ou side was a hansom to which he rushed. Aft some haggling over the price—for Orcu would sometimes begrudge even a quarte if he thought he could save it—he jumpe in and was driven to the Grand Centr Depot, where he arrived just in time t catch a way-train for Rhinecliffe.

* * * * *

Sylvia was very much puzzled to accou for Orcutt's sudden departure. After h experience of him that morning, she w strongly inclined to mistrust his every mov ment, and it galled her to see that she alor was so suspicious. Malcolm, though n enamored of Orcutt, seemed well satisfied t have him around; Mrs. Styrges was ver agreeable to him; and the rest seemed t consider him very fair company.

Understanding, of course, that it was b cause he wanted Miss Heslow for himse

that Orcutt had approached her so impudently that morning, she could better understand the difficulties of Malcolm's position when she put herself in Margaret's place and imagined herself married to Orcutt, while all the time she loved Malcolm. If Orcutt could be so treacherous as a lover, what would he not be as a husband? Somehow, she had begun to like Margaret very well. Although they were not much together, she had seen enough of her to appreciate her good qualities—her gentleness of disposition, her cheerfulness and readiness to oblige others. Sylvia was obliged to admit that, in Margaret's position—granting that Margaret was in love with Styrges, which she now hardly doubted—she would have lost all the kindliness of feeling she had ever possessed and would have moped and made herself generally disagreeable. If Margaret's manner was the result of careful self-control, she gave her credit for that; but she was inclined to think that it was rather a something in Margaret's nature which she herself sadly lacked.

Sylvia was greatly disposed to judge her-

self harshly. The change in her which had begun when Malcolm had pleaded with her to accept him had not ceased to develop, until now she was no longer the frivolous, careless society woman, but was rapidly growing to think more of what she owed to those about her. It is one of the truest of axioms, that pure love teaches altruism. Only, perhaps, Sylvia may have learnt more quickly than others, because she loved much. But from the very nature of this change, it was inevitable that she should be more conscious of her own short-comings; and trying to do what was right toward others taught its own lesson and showed her how much there still remained for her to do.

If it proved a hard struggle for her, at least in one certain way it brought its own reward: Malcolm had noticed that she was less exacting, less petulant; and only that afternoon he had surprised her by coming up behind her in the library and kissing her and calling her sweetheart. A short time ago she would have looked upon this as her just due and would have found fault with him had he not treated her affectionately; now,

since she had not exacted it but had received it as a voluntary attention on his part, it gave her the greatest pleasure. And still, it was not altogether pleasure that she felt; for she could not help thinking that he was kind to her only with an effort, that he was trying to atone for his occasional neglect. She had looked up at him and smiled brightly and then he had sat near her and talked to her more pleasantly and cheerfully than she could remember since he had met Miss Heslow.

Winifred, too, being partially the author of this change, had not failed to notice with pleasure the results of her counsel. Several times during the day Sylvia had caught her looking at her with a puzzled expression; but Winifred had smiled approvingly and given a little encouraging nod, which really helped Sylvia vastly. Even Jack, who seldom thought of any one but himself, had looked across at lunch and started her blushing with the exclamation, "Well, Sylvia, I must say that being engaged agrees with you mightily. Why, you and I haven't had a scrap for two days!"

All this was very well in its way, Sylvia thought. But she was not the sort of girl who could be content with doing anything by halves—she must flirt outrageously, or not at all; when she grew angry, she must be very angry; and in her love for Malcolm these very reflections proved that she could not love unless she loved wholly and entirely. And now that she was trying to be nice and good, she could not feel satisfied with what she had already accomplished. Very often now she had the thought that she ought to give Malcolm his freedom, since she was quite confident that he loved Margaret. Would not that be the truest and the best love she could feel for him—to make him happy? But, poor girl, she had always tried to forget this thought as soon as it came to her; for she was but just beginning to learn this sort of happiness.

After Orcutt had gone she played and sang for a time to Malcolm and Gerald, and though she would have liked to stop she kept on at their request until she was thoroughly weary. She thought that Malcolm might have seen that she was tired;

but he was sitting in an easy chair with his head back and his eyes closed, only rousing himself when she paused and asking her to keep on. She would have liked to read his thoughts. It was Anthony who at length noticed that she was tired of playing and opposed Styrges when the latter asked for more.

"You wish we would let you go, don't you, Sylvia? Why, my dear Malc! Is your appetite for music insatiable?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, dear!" said Styrges, jumping up. "I was enjoying myself so much, that I forgot how long we have made you work."

"I didn't mind, Malc. Only, I must run upstairs and dress for dinner."

"You have certainly earned it!" he called after her.

She passed Margaret's room on her way to her own and the door was half open. Following an impulse she knocked and asked if she might come in.

"Certainly, do come in, Miss Pelton! I do not see why one of us has not taken the initiative before," said Margaret, com-

ing to meet her. "We ought not be such perfect strangers to each other."

Sylvia went in and took a seat by the window. "Especially as I should really like to know you better," she said earnestly. "I always had an idea that you did not like me very well—that you thought I was a flirt, you know; and so I didn't dare to try to make you think otherwise."

"I am sure all women are flirts," laughed Margaret. She was surprised by Sylvia's friendliness, but it was an agreeable surprise. She had imagined that Sylvia was ill-disposed toward her because of Styrges' attentions to her. But she herself not being one who could bear malice, she welcomed this overture as an opportunity not to be lost. Not being suspicious by nature, of course the thought that Sylvia might have some ulterior object did not enter her mind. "I must say that I always had an idea that you disliked me," she said after a pause. "Why, I don't know."

Sylvia knew very well why she might be supposed to dislike Margaret, but she held her peace on that score.

It was no difficult matter, once the ice was broken, for each of the two girls to find that there was much in the other to be admired, and soon they were chatting pleasantly like old friends. Their love for Malcolm which they shared in common formed, too, a subtle though unacknowledged bond of sympathy between them.

"Speaking of my being a flirt," remarked Sylvia, "I do admit that I used to love to be bright and foolish and to make half-a-dozen young fellows think that I liked them each better than all the rest—it comes natural to me. Don't you think that, as a matter of fact, men should be grateful to girls like myself for helping them in their education? Lots of the extremely young men one meets are just conceited enough to believe all one tells them; our duty is to prove to them that they are foolish to believe all they hear. Then they begin to look about them for the honest, sincere kind like you. If we did not teach them at an early age, they might learn only when it was too late."

"But why should not all girls be 'honest

and sincere,' as you are good enough to call me? Then there would be no reason for broadening the views of those young men. You forget, too, that men are quite as great flirts as girls are."

"No, I don't. I suppose we are made so for a purpose. Life would be fearfully stupid if one met always people who said only and exactly what they mean. I suppose some people are born honest and sincere, some acquire it, and others have it thrust upon them. Now, of late, I am honest and sincere—I had it thrust upon me, when I became engaged to Malcolm." She watched Margaret narrowly and saw that she reddened. "I could never understand, when I watched other girls like myself, how a real man could ever decide to marry a flirt; and I was so grateful to Fate for delivering one into my hands, that I resolved to reform. Don't you think he is worth it?"

"Perhaps," said Margaret with a slight effort, "it is just because you were a flirt that he loved you. But I think you are right in resolving to turn over a new leaf, for I am sure he will love you better than ever if you show him that you are sincere.

"But the funny part of it is, you know, that he does not love me," said Sylvia. It was rather hard on Margaret; but Sylvia had an ill-defined purpose in thus torturing her. "He loves some one else."

"He didn't tell you?" exclaimed Margaret, startled from her composure. Then, immediately after, "That's such a funny thing to say to one's fiancée!"

"He told me, when he asked me to marry him, that he did not love me," Sylvia said smiling; "so of course I know he loves some one else."

She did not look at Margaret, or she would have seen on her face an expression which almost asked the question, "Why do you take delight in this? Can't you see that I am suffering? And I have never harmed you!" But Sylvia was gazing out through the window.

"Do you think I am right in holding him to his promise?" Sylvia continued. "He has been just as good and kind to me as though he actually cared for me—it must be awfully hard for him," she added musingly.

"Do you love him?" Margaret managed to ask.

"Better than anything else in the world," she answered quietly.

"Then I should say, keep him," said Margaret quickly. "But why should you ask me?" she added more easily.

"Because I wished to discover, if possible, if you loved him," she said smiling.

Margaret's face grew hard in an instant. "Have you found out?"

"I think so—I am sure that you do." She rose to go.

"Supposing I did, do you think it would be very kind of you to triumph over me, as you seem to wish to do?" she asked calmly.

Sylvia smiled at her again. Margaret did not understand the smile, for there was nothing mocking or triumphant in it, but rather sadness.

"I think it would be very kind in me to wish to know if you love him or not." She went over to Margaret and, in spite of some resistance on her part, kissed her on the cheek. "I think there are other ways of

proving one's love for a man than by marrying him, dear," she said. "Good-bye."

Margaret remained standing in the centre of the room in a very perplexed state of mind. She had seen Sylvia in such a variety of moods in such a short space of time that she did not know what to think, what to believe. She was not ashamed of her love for Malcolm—for surely she had as much right to love him as had any one else—but she was ashamed to think that she had suffered it to become evident to Sylvia. And if Sylvia had discovered it so easily, had not Malcolm also seen it? And did not he therefore esteem her less? In her anxiety she lost sight of the fact that in such matters a woman's penetration is so far ahead of a man's that the latter scarcely appears to exist. Besides, a man loses all the penetration he ever possessed when it is a question of understanding the feelings of the woman he loves.

At first she was only angry with herself, with her weakness and lack of self-control. Then, when her mind reverted to Sylvia, she grew puzzled to know whether to be

angry with her or not. Surely, Sylvia had taken an unfair advantage of her to force her secret from her. She had come to her as a friend and had proven herself an enemy. And yet, Sylvia had not used her knowledge to humble her—Margaret. She had, on the contrary, in spite of her treachery, acted kindly all through. . . . And what had she meant by saying that there were other ways of proving one's love for a man than by marrying him? Margaret did not dare to think of the possibility that she meant to release Styrges—and yet the thought sent a happy thrill through her. But she could never take Malcolm as a gift from Sylvia. That would be too humiliating—as though she had been mooning about in a lovelorn manner and Sylvia had taken pity on her. And still, she thought, viewed in another light, it was not so bad; for if Sylvia should set him free, it would not be in pity for her, Margaret, but for his own sake. But Sylvia would not do so; and Margaret felt that she would do better not to think any more about it.

Sylvia, too, had abundant food for thought.

She had gone in to talk to Margaret with the simple object of trying to be more friendly with her. Then, once there, the impulse had seized her to try to understand Margaret's feelings toward Styrges. When she was sure that Margaret loved him, the knowledge seemed to impel her to form definitely her resolution to set him free of his promises. She had been delaying the time when she should think seriously of this alternative, and when she first entered Margaret's room it was the thing furthest from her intentions to bring matters to a crisis so soon.

She would not admit that it was from any pity for Margaret that she was ready to sacrifice herself; she owed no more to her than she did to hundreds of others. But at the same time she satisfied herself that Margaret loved Malcolm, she had also been impressed by the feeling that if she must give him up, she would at least give him to a girl who was worthy of him. And, although she did not realize it, there was in her heart some pity for Margaret which, combined with other influences, had wrung from her more than she had intended to say. And so,

when she reached her room, she threw h
self on the couch and bit the pillows in l
agony to keep from crying aloud. She l
now no alternative, she stood committe
she must give up him whom she loved.

It was long before she grew calm enou
to think. She was surprised, now the wo
was over, to find that she felt almost hap
Malcolm might try and try, she thought; l
if he loved Margaret anything nearly as m
as she, Sylvia, loved him, he would never s
ceed in making a loving, though he might
a kind, husband. It was better for her to
unhappy now, once and for all, than to h
continual heartaches for the rest of her da
Besides, did not she already feel hapl
when she thought of the joy she wo
bring to two people?—Had it not given
a keen pleasure to hint to Margaret that
had it in her mind to make her hapl
She did not go beyond this, as yet; but
tried to think more of the bright side tl
of her own sorrow. So that when she w
down to dinner that evening she had a
lighter and more contented heart than e
before.

She was secretly amused during dinner to see that Margaret was as cool as she well could be toward Styrges, avoiding any conversation with him as carefully as she could. She saw, too, that this puzzled and annoyed him, and that after two or three decided attempts to interest Margaret he grew very quiet and reserved. She considered herself entitled to tease Margaret a little more.

"When we are married, Malc," she said, during a momentary silence, "I want you to get a home away down town to live in—just as far down town as is respectable."

She saw that Margaret looked intently into her champagne glass, then recovered herself and began to talk to Mrs. Styrges. Malcolm, too, appeared to be thinking of other matters, for he stammered and asked her to repeat. She was glad to see that either she was keeping Margaret in a state of suspense, or else Margaret had not understood the hint that afternoon and considered her heartless and treacherous. Well, she would soon think differently!

After dinner she asked Malcolm if he would not come out and walk with her on

the piazza, as it was unusually warm for this time of year, and smoke his cigar out there. She put her arm through his and they paced up and down for some time in silence.

"Do you love me, dear?" she asked, looking up at him. He stooped and kissed her, but said nothing. "No!" she said authoritatively, "I do not want you to kiss me—I want an answer."

"Why do you ask, Sylvia?"

"Why don't you answer?" she said again. "Because I want to know, of course."

"You remember what I told you at first, don't you, dear?" She nodded. "Well, I am afraid I cannot say any more yet—if you want me to tell you honestly."

"Oh, Malc! won't you try to treat me, for just this evening, as though you loved me?" she asked, almost sobbing. "I won't ask you to again, dear."

He put his arm about her and looked into her face. "Why, what is the matter, little girl? Have I been doing anything to make you unhappy"

"No, it's not you," she sobbed. Then she tried to push his arm away. "I didn't mean

it, Malc—don't be kind to me. I did not know what I was saying. It's all right, dear—only I have the blues to-night. Now won't you kiss me, dear?—just once, and then go in and look after the rest."

He did not understand her at all, but he did as she asked. "Why do you want me to go, Sylvia? Won't you come in too? You will catch a chill out here."

"No, no! Do leave me, Malc!" she said earnestly. "And if Miss Heslow is inside, will you tell her that she will do me a great favor if she will come out and talk to me for a little while?"

"You are certainly very strange to-night, Sylvia," he said looking at her with a puzzled expression. "I suppose you know what you want, dear. Only don't stay out very long."

He went inside and found Margaret talking to Pelton. She barely glanced up as he approached but went on with the conversation. In a moment, however, Jack appealed to him for judgment, and Margaret was obliged to look at him.

"Sylvia wished me to ask you, Miss Hes-

low, if you would not keep her company on the piazza for a little while. She sent me away and seemed to want you. I will keep Mr. Pelton until you come back—won't I, Jack?"

"Where is she? Out at the front?" asked Margaret, rising. "Is it cool out? I'll be back very soon, Mr. Pelton, so do remember where we were at."

She did not want to go, for she could not have any confidence in Sylvia, and suspected her of a wish to annoy her still more. But it was out of the question to decline to go, so she threw a shawl about her and went to the front door.

"Is that you, Miss Heslow?" called Sylvia, coming forward. "Won't you come outside and walk up and down? I want to talk to you. I suppose you think I came to your room to-day just to insult you?" she went on, as Margaret simply acquiesced silently in her request. "Don't you, now?"

"I think you certainly took a great liberty in talking to me as you did," said Margaret quietly. "I surely had no reason to expect you to act so."

"You are very right," said Sylvia calmly. They were walking slowly side by side, and Sylvia took her arm. "Now do not be angry—but I am going to take a still greater liberty. I want you to answer me candidly—do you love Malcolm?"

Margaret half drew her arm away, and then thought better of it. "If I did, you and he are naturally the two last people I should tell. Why are you so anxious to know?" she asked steadily.

"It is all for the best. Now let me hear you say that you do not love him." She waited a moment, but Margaret said nothing. "Very well, I am certain that you do," resumed Sylvia, "and I am glad of it."

"It is a perfect mystery to me why you should show such peculiarly bad taste as to wish to pursue this subject," said Margaret, still calmly. She was making a great effort to control every emotion of annoyance or anger—or worse.

"It will not be a mystery for long," said Sylvia. "Now I assure you, Miss Heslow, that I am speaking in all seriousness and am not trying to offend you. Malcolm loves you

and he does not love me. I see very plainl than he and I can never be happy togethe and I love him too dearly to want to mak him miserably dissatisfied for the rest of h life. Now I see that not only does he lov you, but you love him. If I did not lik you, I could never dream of giving him u to you. But I do like you and I think yo will make him happy, so I ask you to t kind to him and marry him if he asks you- I know he will."

Margaret could not believe her sense She looked at Sylvia in utter amazement then Sylvia kissed her and she began to u derstand—that Malcolm might now be her if she would take him!—and her pric revolted at the thought.

"I don't think Mr. Styrges would care t be disposed of in this way," she said weakl "Oh, no! I never could think of it!" sh cried. She forgot her wish to conceal h real feelings, and remembered only that sh would not consent to owe her happiness t Sylvia.

"Understand, my dear girl, I shall s Malcolm free of my own wish, not becau

he has given me the shadow of a reason for doing so. He will come to you perfectly blameless of this affair. And you need not feel that I am giving him to you because I pity you. I ought to pity you; but the true reason is that I know that you can bring him the greatest happiness. If you refuse him, it would make it all of no avail that I give him up. Now, think, don't you love him enough to marry him?"

"You are an angel, Sylvia!" said Margaret, throwing her arms about the other. "I can't get used to the idea, but—I'll try."

"Yes, dear," said Sylvia, a little sadly. "You will try, and you will soon grow used to it."

CHAPTER IX.

MARGARET arose the next morning with a light heart, feeling that the world had suddenly grown very bright for her. Sylvia's announcement of her intentions the evening before had taken her by surprise, and her first and natural womanly impulse had been to refuse to accept so great a kindness from her rival. But a little reflection showed her that it was really Malcolm's happiness of which Sylvia thought, not hers; and she was convinced that it would be criminally throwing away her own happiness to indulge any false pride. Margaret was by nature too honest to deceive herself, even where her pride was concerned. So her last thought at night had been one of joy to know that she was free to accept Malcolm should he ask her to be his wife—as she felt sure he would do.

She had felt that she would like to lie with

her head on the pillow and revel in pleasant thoughts of the happiness that was to come to her. But when she woke in the morning and realized the new brightness of her life, she felt a certain surprise that she had been able to sleep so peacefully. It is said that joy kills. That is a thoroughly false supposition—happiness will not even cause one to lie awake.

She was singing over her toilette, and her aunt opened the door between the two rooms and looked in.

"Why, Margy!" she exclaimed; "It seems years since I have seen you so happy! What has come over you?"

"Nothing has come over me, Auntie," she laughed. "Something is coming to me—oh, no! I won't tell you, so don't ask!"

"I think the last time I heard you sing was after the dance where we met Mr. Styrges."

Margaret turned to hide a blush. "It may be, Auntie," she said. "I'll sing for you every morning, if you want me to."

Though Sylvia did not sing when she woke that morning, she did not the less feel happy in a quiet, subdued sort of way. She was

growing used to the idea of her sacrifice and was not so afraid to think of it. She had told Winifred of her intention, and the latter had warmly espoused the cause of her own sex, and had persisted in her belief that Malcolm must have given Sylvia some strong reason—by undue neglect or unkindness—for breaking the engagement.

"That is not so at all!" said Sylvia, almost angrily. Why would other people make it so hard for her to do right! "Malc has been everything that is good and kind to me. I do not see why you will not take my word for it? It is my own wish and my own doing. You wait just a little while, Winnie, and you'll understand it all very much better. If you knew all the circumstances, you would advise me to do just as I intend doing."

Of course Winifred did not understand and was only half convinced—in fact, she had not understood Sylvia for some days past, for she had not thought that Sylvia had it in her to take advice so well. But she knew better than to try to turn her from her resolve, so she only kissed her and re-

marked: "Well, dear, I suppose you know what is right and best."

"No one but you and Malc and—well, no one is to know about this until we go back to town, Win. I shouldn't dare to tell it to Jack now, you know."

Sylvia was not going to do things by halves: so she waited until late to go down to breakfast, as she did not want to see Malcolm alone until the time she herself might choose.

She found the entire party there. Margaret looked up and smiled, and everybody seemed somehow nicer to her than ever before. She avoided talking to Malcolm any more than was positively necessary and devoted herself to Gerald Anthony.

While she was talking to him she was more than ever impressed with a sense of his bravery and patience before and after she had refused him. She realized more than ever before how much he must love her, since, with all he suffered, he was as kind and cheerful to her as ever. Then the thought entered her mind—might not she bring a little happiness to just one more

heart? She did not love Gerald—she did not believe for a moment that she could ever love any one but Malcolm; but she had more respect and esteem and genuine liking for Gerald than for any man she knew. If she ever should be anything to him, would not it be a case of herself and Malcolm reversed? Yes; only that she felt sure that if she should ever like Gerald well enough to marry him, she would never like any other man better—and by then Malcolm would be only a dear memory. Then she remembered her promise to Gerald, that if she ever could give him a chance she would tell him so. This decided her: she would not raise false hopes, she would not deceive him by the slightest word or look which she did not mean; but she would bring into his life the single ray of hope which she could conscientiously hold out.

"Take me out to see the stables, or the garden, or something, Gerald," she said to him as they rose from the table. "I want to have a little talk with you."

"How will Malcolm like it?" he asked in a whisper.

"Malc will like it very much indeed," she said smiling. "Come on, take me somewhere."

"Well, let's go out to the barn," he said. "Can I get your coat?"

"No, I'll get it—wait a minute;" and she ran upstairs.

When she came back she saw Styrges standing in the hall talking with Anthony. "Come along, Gerald," she called as she passed them.

"Hold up! Where are you going?" cried Styrges. "Can't I go too?"

"No, we don't want you," she said, smiling back at him. "Fear not, I shall be back soon."

Not only Styrges, but Gerald too, was completely mystified by Sylvia's conduct. The latter, however, did as he was told and trotted along by her side talking about one thing and another, until she cut him short.

"Time is precious, Gerald. Can you keep a secret?"

"Usually."

"Yes, I know you can. Do you remember one afternoon when you came to see me

and asked me a certain question, and I said, no?"

"Yes. I never forget it," he said quietly.

"And do you remember that you asked me to make a certain promise? Do you recollect what that promise was?"

"Yes," he managed to say. He was looking at her in amazement. He felt, somehow or other, that she was about to lecture him for something he had said or done, that she was about to be more cruel than before—if that were possible.

"The secret is," she continued, almost enjoying his astonishment, "that I shall soon be a free woman again."

"Sylvia, don't trifle with me, for God's sake!" he cried. All the love against which he had fought so earnestly, which he had struggled so manfully to keep within his own breast, all this love for her boiled in his veins and rose to his head and seemed to choke him.

"That is just what I want to avoid, Gerald," she said gently. "I have decided to break the engagement between Malcolm and myself for—for certain very good reasons

of my own. It is not in any way his fault nor because of anything he has done which he should not have done. I can't tell you the reasons; only understand, Malc is perfectly blameless. He does not know it yet, but I shall tell him to-day."

For a minute Gerald, divided between astonishment and a vague hope, could not speak. But hope won the mastery.

"And do you tell me this, Sylvia, because you wish me to understand that I may have a chance? Oh, say that I have, dear!"

She looked at him and felt glad that she had spoken. She wished for his sake that she could say more.

"No, Gerald, you have no chance now—surely, you think better of me than to suppose you have? I don't know that I shall ever care for you, and I do not want to give you an atom of false hope. But I thought I owed it to you to tell you that I was free, and, more than that, if you care to come to me a year from now, not expecting anything but willing and ready to take your chances, I may be able to say differently. I shall not expect you to come, and there is absolutely

no agreement between us. But in any cas we are what we have always been, the be of friends."

"Sylvia, God bless you," he said, takir her hand. "After waiting for so long, pa of the time not even knowing what hoj was, a year will be nothing. Although yc say you give no hope, the very fact of yoi telling me so is hope enough in itself."

"Don't interpret too freely," she sa: gently.

* * * * *

Deserted by Sylvia, Malcolm looked aboi him for Margaret; but she had disappeare Winifred Pelton, Jack, and Mrs. Rand seeme to have consolidated into a triple allianc with the object in view of mutual entertai ment; so he forbore to change into a quadi lateral the triangle of which they formed tl angles, and started upstairs to his roon His mother's door was open and she calle to him to come in, so he turned and wei in and sat down.

"When are you and Sylvia going to l married, Malc?"

"Oh, pretty soon, I guess, mother. Sl

does not seem to be in any great hurry about it."

"I do not understand it at all," she said emphatically. "It is not as though you had not the means of supporting her or there were any terrible obstacles! Why don't you persuade her to marry you soon?"

"I have tried to, mother," he said rather wearily. "There is no use in trying to hurry her. She will marry me when she is ready, I suppose. Let's not talk of that."

"Do you think everybody is having a pleasant time, Malc?"

"In a quiet way," he said. "There is not much to do at this time of year."

"I intend to take every one for a drive back in the country this afternoon," she continued. "Do you know, I like Mrs. Rand and Miss Heslow ever so well, Malc! If you were not to marry Sylvia, I should like to see you married to Miss Heslow."

"If I were not to marry Sylvia, she is the one I would marry," said Styrges before he thought. "She is a very sweet girl," he added.

His mother appeared not to notice the first part of his speech. "Mrs. Rand is so nice, too! She told me such a sad story about Miss Heslow's father—I should like to tell it to you."

"Don't tell me if it is a secret."

"It is a secret, I suppose, but only from Margaret. I do not think Mrs. Rand would mind if I told you—only be sure not to repeat it to a soul! It seems that for some years before his death Frederick Heslow and a man named Anderson were joint treasurers of a company which owned and operated a small but important railroad. Heslow and Anderson had been friends and companions for years—they were, in fact, almost as brothers.

"About the time Margaret was born officers came one evening to Heslow's house and arrested him on the charge of embezzling from the funds of the company. It was a cold, bleak night, and Heslow had already a severe cold. He was driven to the station-house in a draughty cab and passed the night in a cold cell. The next day when called to answer the charges against

him, he pleaded not guilty, but refused to make any statement. He was admitted to bail—though the whole affair was conducted secretly and never leaked out, at his request one or two of his friends were informed and Phœnix Atwood gave bail—and he returned to his home a very sick man. The next day pneumonia set in, and in a week he died—protesting his innocence, yet saying not a word to explain away the charge, not even to his wife. The poor woman was half crazed with grief, and very shortly after she died of a broken heart.

"Anderson had disappeared the day after Heslow's arrest, and in spite of all efforts to trace him, his whereabouts remained a secret. This circumstance, of course, was equivalent to a confession of guilt. But, though the company individually was inclined to believe in Heslow's innocence, they felt bound to consider him equally guilty with Anderson because he had not been tried and proven innocent. It was marvellous that they were able to keep the affair a secret; but they wished to do so because the sum was large and they feared to injure their credit were

the amount made known. So they went on believing him guilty until nearly a year after, when one day the president received a bulky letter, mailed in some little town in Canada. It was from Anderson, and contained a written confession attested by a notary. The substance of it was this :—

"Anderson had for some months previous to Heslow's arrest been falsifying the accounts and appropriating to his own use large sums of money. Heslow had suspected this, and only a week before the catastrophe he had accused Anderson of false management. Anderson broke down and pleaded for mercy. Heslow, contrary to his usually strict sense of honesty, to shield his old friend gave his promise to keep the matter secret for thirty days, taking in return Anderson's written acknowledgment of guilt and a promise to return the entire sum within thirty days. Anderson's repentance had been sincere and he had fully intended to refund the missing money. But when Heslow was arrested, Anderson thought only of gaining time; for he fully expected that Heslow would tell the whole

truth. It was remorse at learning of Heslow's loyalty, not repentance for his sin, that had driven him to confess when it was too late.

"Some years later Mrs. Rand discovered in a bundle of Heslow's papers, hidden away in a corner of his desk, Anderson's original confession. Though he knew that he was dying, that he might leave to his family a name that was under a cloud, though he had the proof of his innocence almost within arm's reach, Heslow would not for all this be guilty of breaking a solemn promise. No wonder, Malc, that his daughter attracts every one so strongly to herself!"

He did not answer but only nodded, and then rose and went slowly up to his room. He naturally felt a great pity and reverence for one who could suffer so keenly, so unjustly, and yet of his own free will for the sake of another who was so unworthy. He felt, too, by force of association, a sort of pity for Margaret. But most of all did he realize anew how hard, how cruel it was to him that he might not win her for himself. He had begun to grow more accustomed to the

idea because he had tried not to think about her. But now his own mother had just told him that which, somehow or other, made him respect and love her a thousand times more deeply than ever before, and which made it just so much more difficult for him to abandon all thoughts of her. He must now begin all over again and go through the fight once more. Would it always be so? He clenched his teeth in agony. Bah! this was not the way to forget her! He was cowardly, he was even afraid to make the effort! He must move about, must act—do something, anything, which would make him think of other things.

There are two conditions of human emotion at which the gods must laugh: one is the change from great happiness to great sorrow; the other, the sudden transition of the mind from great sorrow to extreme joy. Is it not, in the former case, in itself one of the divine punishments, and in the latter case one of Heaven's greatest blessings, that we are so constituted that our minds can so rapidly pass from the one state to the other? Is the gradual dawning of hope in a heart that

has known no hope a source of greater happiness than is the positive and instant realization of joy?

Styrges pulled himself together and went downstairs. Some one was evoking from the piano a rare assortment of discords in the vain attempt to play one of Sousa's two-steps. He glanced in and saw Anthony, with face radiant, occupying the piano-stool. Styrges turned away with a sigh, realizing that here was one who felt in no mood to sympathize. On the piazza he found Sylvia.

"Have you repented already of your cruel desertion of me?" he asked.

"Oh, that was not cruel," she said nervously. She looked pale and worried, but she had herself well in hand. She had gone so far now that she was beginning almost to enjoy her self-sacrifice—it gave her pleasure to see people surprised. "I want to tell you some good news, Malc."

"Let's hear it," he said, joining her.

"Did you once promise me that you would do anything in your power to please me and to make me happy?" she asked, after a pause.

"I did, and I do still."

"Even if you do not want to do it?"

"So long as it is something I am able to do," he said very promptly.

"I am going to ask of you such a kindness now," she said gently. "I have definitely determined to break our engagement; and what I wish you to do is to ask Miss Heslow to marry you." She enjoyed his start of surprise, but she interrupted him when he tried to speak. "I take all the responsibility and it is all my own doing. You have been everything that is kind to me, you have kept your promises as well as is in any man's power; and I could not find any excuse, even if I wished, for releasing you. The real reason is that I know you do not love me and that you would never be happy with me—nor, probably, should I. I want you to marry Margaret, if she will have you, because I am sure that you do love her. You are perfectly free now, from this minute, and you are under no obligations to me, except what I have just asked of you. Only, Malc, don't let any one but Miss Heslow know of this until we get back to town."

"Then you do not love me any more, Sylvia?" he exclaimed, as soon as she gave him an opportunity to speak.

"I cannot say that," she answered with an attempt to smile. "Perhaps you will understand me better when you think it over."

He hardly yet understood the full meaning of her words, did not realize that he was now free to marry the woman he loved, if he could win her. He had a half-guilty, half-ashamed feeling that he had not been true to Sylvia, that he had made it too evident that he loved Margaret.

"No, I can't accept your release, Sylvia. I should always feel that you blamed me in your own thoughts."

"How often must I tell you, Malc, that you are not to blame for anything! This is all my own wish. And you have promised—promised, mind you!—to do as I ask. Oh!" she said, turning away, "why will you make it harder for me? Now please agree to all I ask," she said, recovering herself.

Although he had still an impression that he was in some way to blame, and that he

ought to feel ashamed to take her at her word, he could no longer doubt that she was in earnest. And if she said that he had acted right, it must be so—really, he had tried to be kind to her! Then he did realize what this might mean to him—freedom and Margaret!

"You will do as I ask?" she repeated.

"Yes," he said gently. "God forgive me if I am doing wrong."

"No. Although you don't know it, you are doing me a great deal of good," she said, with tears in her eyes. Then she turned quickly and ran to the door. "Don't forget the latter half of your promise," she said softly, pausing.

"Sylvia!" He went to her. "If you had only been like this a year ago, I could never have loved any one else. God bless you, dear!"

She smiled through her tears, then flung her arms about his neck and kissed him passionately—and before he knew it, she was gone.

Probably the day was yet to come when Styrges would realize how much it had cost

Sylvia to make the sacrifice. Certainly, he could not realize it then—who, indeed, could, save Sylvia herself? It must be confessed that of the two emotions, love and gratitude, called forth by the two women, love gained the ascendancy and maintained it during all the rest of the day. He walked down to the river in order to give himself time to grow accustomed to the change in his future. He could not reason or plan concerning his happiness—it was just one great thought,—the knowledge that his happiness had come to him at last.

One definite idea he had: that he was free to love Margaret, and that he must see her and be near her and speak with her. During luncheon he and Sylvia tried to act exactly as though nothing had happened. He drew her into the conversation occasionally; but in his anxiety to see if she would act any differently toward him, he could learn nothing. Perhaps Sylvia noticed a change, noticed that Margaret was more subdued, that there was a light of happy anticipation in her eyes, a bright color in her cheeks. To this, however, Malcolm's very eagerness

rendered him blind. It is a strange fact, that a man can judge with reasonable accuracy whether a woman loves another man or no; but, through fear of deceiving himself, he cannot so well determine if she loves himself. The dog that sits at her feet, or the cat that purrs softly in her arms, is a better judge.

In the afternoon the party went for a drive. Margaret and Jack Pelton were in the trap with Sylvia and Styrges. Sylvia very considerately tried to talk to her brother. Practically this helped Styrges very little, for general conversation was unavoidable. In fact, Margaret resisted Sylvia's good intentions and made rather a point of appealing to her brother and herself. Of course Styrges had not dreamed of making love to Margaret in Sylvia's presence; but he was rather disheartened to find that she was not content to talk to him to the comparative exclusion of others. Again, when the party halted for a few moments before starting to return, Margaret persisted in giving him no opportunity for a *tête-à-tête*. He was not so much surprised at this, after

all; for how should she know that he was free? But he was vexed that she should take such pains to avoid him. Perhaps he would have understood better had he overheard Sylvia whisper to Margaret during the drive home that she was "a very naughty girl," at which Margaret blushed violently and shook her head.

They were finishing dinner when Orcutt arrived. He was hailed by Malcolm and told to come in as he was and not to bother to dress.

"How's business?" two or three asked as he came in the door. "Did you untangle the tangle, Orcutt?" asked Malcolm, as the other sat down.

"Charmingly, Malc!" he said, rubbing his hands one over the other. He seemed to be very well satisfied with himself, but a little nervous. "I am very hungry, so please don't wait for me. I feel very much out of place—all covered with dust and ashes."

"I'll stay and smoke while you eat," said Styrges. He felt too happy to begrudge a few minutes, even to Orcutt.

One by one the others left; until, by the

time Orcutt lit a cigar, only he and Styrges remained. He was feeling more nervous every minute; he almost wished he had left Heslow *père* to rest in peace. He was inclined to drop the whole business, now that he found himself face to face with Styrges, and to find some other and safer way to compromise Miss Heslow. Yet here was the opportunity—and he had paid a good sum to Ryan! He ceased to talk and began nervously to smooth his forehead.

"What's the matter with you, Orcutt?" He started at the sound of Styrges' voice. "Come in and beat me at billiards, and don't sit there trying to rub some sense into your head!" It was rather rude; but it was not the first time Styrges had joked him about this habit.

"All right, Malc. Will you give me twenty-five in a hundred?"

The billiard-room was deserted save by themselves, and Orcutt knew that now, if ever, was his chance. He grew more uneasy the longer he waited. To be successful, he must tell his story casually, naturally.

"I heard a very curious story to-day,

Malc," he began, puffing up his cigar; "one which sort of concerns us all. I don't know if I had better repeat it—yes, I guess I will, though. It's about Miss Heslow," he said, watching Styrges narrowly.

Styrges gave a start of astonishment, then looked severely at Orcutt. But that gentleman was busy calculating a shot. Could it be that Orcutt had heard the same tale that he himself had listened to that morning? Pshaw! no: how could it have leaked out? Better let him tell it, however.

"Go ahead with it," he said in an indifferent tone."

"It was an old fellow named—Belden, I think it was—whom I know slightly. I saw him at lunch, we got to talking, and I told him I was visiting up here. Then he asked who else was here, and I told him, mentioning Miss Heslow as being of the party. 'What! not the daughter of Frederick Heslow, the defaulter?' he cried. Then he told me how Heslow and another man named Anderson had embezzled sums of money from some railroad company, were detected, how Anderson escaped, and how Heslow died in

jail." He glanced at Styrges. The latter was gazing down at the floor and Orcutt could not see his eyes. But there was a drawn look about the mouth, which Orcutt took to mean, not anger, but rather pain. "So you see, Miss Heslow has a peculiar family secret," he ventured.

Styrges half sprang toward him, then recovered himself and let his hands drop to his sides. What was the use of being angry? Orcutt was misinformed by hearing an exaggerated repetition of some story based on a mere inkling of the true facts. Only, he had no right to speak of her in that insulting manner! Well, even that meant nothing to Orcutt: it was only his ignorance and innate rudeness of feeling.

"You should learn not to speak so insultingly of a lady under any circumstances, Orcutt," he said, eyeing him sternly.

"I am always putting my foot in it," said Orcutt, inwardly trembling. "Don't ever breathe a word of this to any one."

"No, I am not like you," said Styrges contemptuously. "Oh, I beg your pardon!" he added hastily. "I shouldn't have said

that. Now, as to Mr. Heslow, you have been misinformed. Heslow was no more a defaulter than you or I, and he did not die in jail, but in his bed at home. Anderson, his friend, was the real thief, and Heslow suffered in order to shield him. I won't go into details, but those are the true facts. Of course," he said pointedly, at the same time reaching for his cue to continue the game, "of course you will be very careful to keep your own counsel in the future."

As he took his cue from where it was leaning against a table, he brushed against Orcutt's coat, so that it fell on the floor. Orcutt was at the other end of the room. Styrges bent and picked up the coat; and as he did so, a folded sheet of foolscap dropped from the pocket. He laid the coat on the table, picked up the paper and laid it on the coat, and was just about to turn, when some words on the paper caught his eye. Involuntarily he glanced again and read printed at the top, "William Ryan, Private detective." Beneath this was written in ink, "Report on the Heslow case," while below this was the date of that very day. He

picked up the paper, and at the same moment Orcutt hurried toward him.

"Damn you, put that down!" he cried.

Styrges held the paper behind him. "Get back!" he said quietly. But so stern was the tone and his eyes glittered so dangerously that Orcutt hesitated.

"Give it to me!" said Orcutt excitedly "It doesn't concern you—you have no business to look at it!"

"I shall make it my business," said Styrges still quietly. "Now go and sit down there!" pointing to a chair. "Go!"

Somehow all Orcutt's bluster failed him and he sank weakly into the chair and buried his face in one hand. The fingers of the other twitched nervously at a button of his coat. Styrges walked over to the light, unfolded the paper, and therein read a full and true account of the affair connected with Frederick Heslow.

When he had finished he deliberately folded the paper and tore it into small pieces. Then he walked over to Orcutt and stood in front of him. Orcutt looked up and regarded him furtively.

"So you knew all along that you were lying to me—no, liar is too good a name for you!" he said, making a great effort to speak quietly. "There is a train from the station in an hour, and I dare say you can walk it in that time. Do you understand me, you—no, I won't call you names, you wouldn't understand them! Come, hurry up!"

"I loved her!" he said, the words seeming to choke in his throat.

"You lie! And don't let me hear you refer to Miss Heslow again, even as 'her,' or I shall certainly give you one of the thrashings you deserve. Bah! the air is bad in here!"—as he walked to the door opening on the piazza and threw it wide. "I give you one hour," he said over his shoulder, and stepped outside.

For some minutes he walked impatiently up and down, resisting the temptation to go back and prove his anger in some more substantial manner. As he was passing the front door for the fifth or sixth time, it was opened and Margaret came out. She half drew back when she saw him; but at the sight of her he forgot Orcutt, and remem-

bered only his love for her. He was by her side in an instant, and before she could resist or say anything, he had drawn her outside and closed the door.

"Are not you a trifle rough, Mr. Styrges?" she remarked, smiling.

"For Heaven's sake, listen to me, Margaret! I am free—do you know it?"

She tried to draw away her hand, which he had seized and held; then she tried to laugh and say something about the lights on the river. But the words died on her lips, for he had put his arm about her and was looking at her lovingly, pleadingly.

"Yes—I know it," she said faintly.

"You know I love you. Will you marry me, sweetheart? Won't you say that you will try to love me?"

Once again she tried feebly to draw herself away, but he held her closer. Then she looked up in his face and smiled.

"Why should I try, dear?" she said softly.

THE END.

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